
IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH ARAB COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD ORDER

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In recent years, the role of regional actors has increased against the backdrop of the global transformation of the world order and they begin to pursue independent policies, greatly reducing their dependence on the world's superpowers. In the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia are becoming the most active actors. The article is devoted to the problem of relations between Iran and Arab countries (special attention is paid to Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Syria) in the last two decades, in the era of global transformation of the world order. In this context, it is important to note the strengthening role of the BRICS as a new important world pole, to which several Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, have joined. These processes have helped to reduce the intensity of conflicts in the region. Among the countries considered, Iran has historically had the closest relations with Syria. Iran made considerable efforts to support and reinforce Assad's government which was ultimately overthrown due to a combination of circumstances. Until recently, Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia have been tense, reaching a peak of confrontation during the Syrian war. In 2023, the two countries achieved normalization of relations, but in 2026, after the start of American-Israeli aggression against Iran, they again sharply deteriorated. The relations between Iran and Algeria (a BRICS candidate country) developed quite well during the period under review, and are expected to strengthen further in the future.

Keywords: *Iran, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Syria, BRICS, world order, civil war.*

Introduction

The world order is currently undergoing a transformation that means very significant changes in the geopolitical situation, both globally and locally in the Middle East. The most significant feature of this transformation is the shift from a unipolar world led by the United States to a multipolar one, in which several major centers exist, located primarily outside the West, such as Russia, China, India, and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. Against this backdrop, the role of Global South states in world politics is increasing, driven by their economic and demographic growth (Goldstone and May 2023), as well as their economic and geopolitical attractiveness to other countries, which intensifies the competition for the countries of Africa and the Global South in general (see, e.g., Grinin and Korotayev 2023; Grinin, Grinin, and Korotayev 2024). Moreover, in recent years, the processes of transformation of the world order and political polarization between the West and non-Western actors have accelerated sharply, so that the World-System has entered an age of turbulence. This means that conflict and turbulence have

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increased significantly, including the risks of new armed clashes in various countries and regions, especially in the least stable and most heterogeneous ones. This rather serious period of instability will continue until a new world order is established, in which the United States is expected to lose its status of an absolute leader (Grinin 2023b; Grinin, Grinin, and Korotayev 2024).

Another key feature of the emerging new world order is the increasing role of major regional states that previously had played a secondary role. Undoubtedly, these regional states (such as Iran, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, and in other regions, Argentina, Thailand, and South Africa) will not be able to play the role of global superpowers, as they lack the necessary resources and political, economic, and military power to do so. However, these states can free themselves from the influence of the world's major actors and start to pursue independent policies in their own interests, actively competing for influence at the regional level. This is accompanied by a significant weakening of the US position, whose influence previously dominated certain regions of the world. In particular, the USA is withdrawing from the Middle East, which automatically leads to the strengthening of the role of other actors in the region: Russia, China, India, and, among the Middle Eastern countries, of Iran, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia (Grinin 2023a: 58–61). At the same time, the US, the EU, the UK, and Japan, interested in preserving the existing world order in which they hold a dominant position, are rapidly reducing their share of global GDP: from 50.1 % in 2001 to 36.5 % in 2022 (Afontsev 2024).

Since the early 2010s, there has been a gradual process of strengthening regional states in the Middle East. In particular, in July 2013, Saudi Arabia, acting in its own interests, contributed to the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt, which was clearly supported by the United States and the European Union, and to the military's rise to power in that country (The Struggle for the Middle East... 2019: 37–39). Most recently, the strengthening independence of Arab countries has become evident in the restoration of their relations with the Assad government in Syria and the country's return to the Arab League, although the United States and the European Union never recognized that government until its fall in late 2024.

The process of transformation within the World-System is accompanied by a sharp increase in the role of opposing blocs and alliances, within which two major centers stand out: the gradually weakening United States and the rapidly growing China. Developing countries, upon joining such alliances, often express dissatisfaction with the still-prevailing Western global dominance and hope to weaken it. The BRICS international alliance plays a very important role in the transformation of the existing world order, despite certain contradictions among some its members, primarily between China and India (Grinin, Grinin, Korotayev 2024a, 2024b). BRICS was established in June 2006 and continues to expand. Its core principles include an active economic cooperation among member states, as well as the creation of a new multipolar world order based on the principles of justice and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In January 2024, key Middle Eastern states such as Iran, Egypt, and the UAE joined the organization, while Algeria, which had applied for membership in 2022, joined the New Development Bank of BRICS in early September 2024 (TV BRICS 2024).

The growing cooperation between Middle Eastern countries and BRICS member states leads to greater independence for these nations and weakening of Western influence in the region, while simultaneously strengthening the positions of Russia and China. This has resulted in intra-regional reconciliation (the most striking examples being Saudi Arabia's restoration of diplomatic relations with both Iran and Syria) and, as a result, in a significant reduction in the intensity of armed conflicts, as can be seen in the cases of Yemen

or Iraq. Sudan, which remains engulfed in a severe civil war, is a notable exception, but it is the least developed and most peripheral country in the Arab world, with a massive youth bulge and severe interethnic and intertribal conflicts, to some extent spurred from outside. There has also been a sharp escalation of conflicts over the past two years in Palestine and, most recently, in Iran, which has become a victim of attacks by Israel and the United States. These events appear to be the result of a sharp increase in the confrontation between the Global West (represented in the Middle East by Israel) and the rest of the world. But overall, regional dynamics in recent years offer hope that the extremely bloody upheavals in the Middle East during the 2010s, which, like powerful earthquakes, ruined hundreds of cities and villages, destroyed vast tracts of farmland and industrial facilities, claimed the lives of millions, and broke the fate of tens of millions of people across several large and once-prosperous Middle Eastern states, will gradually fade into the past, thanks to the waning influence of the United States (which, *e.g.*, bears a large responsibility for the chaos and destruction in Iraq and Libya) as the major BRICS countries increase their activity in the region.

The issue of trends and features in the development of Iran's relations with Arab countries at the present stage, in the context of the transformation of the world order, is receiving increasing attention in academic circles (see, *e.g.*, Akhmedov 2020; Lashina and Chikrizova 2023). The present study has selected three key countries in the Arab world, considered the most striking examples illustrating the characteristics and challenges of Iranian-Arab relations: Algeria (an example of steady development of relations without significant conflicts), Saudi Arabia (an example of a transition from intense confrontation to normalization), and Syria (an example of a serious divide among both intellectuals and the general public regarding attitudes toward Iran). In addition, the article briefly examines Iran's relations with other major Arab countries, including Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq.

Iran's relations with the Arab world, particularly with the countries of Southwest Asia, were profoundly influenced by the 'Arab Spring' (about the causes and driving forces of the 'Arab Spring,' see: Grinin and Korotayev 2022), which was followed by an intensification of the Sunni-Shia conflict, taking the form of intense armed conflict, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. At the same time, the current bloody Sunni-Shia conflict is compounded by centuries-old stereotypes and prejudices held by parts of Arab society towards Iran and Shia Islam, which many Arabs mistakenly consider a religion based on Zoroastrianism with only a few Islamic dogmas added as a facade; thus, from their perspective, the Iranians are heretics and even 'fire-worshippers' (Piloyan and Mashkova 2022). However, in recent years, the flashpoints of this confrontation have largely subsided, leading to the normalization of Iran's relations with many Arab countries, at least at the official level.

As a source base for this study, media materials have been used, including the official Iranian press, as well as Russian and Western academic and analytical works and statements by experts and political figures from Iran and Arab countries. The main research method employed is situational analysis, which illustrates the dynamics of Iranian-Arab relations while taking various factors into account.

The Long-Term Trend of the USA's Withdrawal from the Middle East

Under Barack Obama, the United States decided to gradually withdraw from the Middle East in order to focus on the Asia-Pacific region. This is evident in a policy paper by Hillary Clinton, who served as US Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013, in which she called the Asia-Pacific region the region of the future and stated that, to maintain its

global leadership, the USA plans to actively strengthen its influence primarily in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than spend vast sums on wars in the Middle East as it did in the 2000s (Clinton 2011). The Obama administration actively moved in this direction, in particular, under his administration, the U.S. withdrew its troops from Iraq in 2011 and sharply reduced its military presence in Afghanistan to 8,000 troops (RBC 2016). Perhaps Obama's refusal to bomb Syria in 2013 was linked not only to Russia's firm opposition to airstrikes and the British Parliament's vote against intervention (though these were important factors for that decision), but also to the USA's reluctance to get involved in another costly war in the Middle East following Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. However, the emergence of ISIS* led to the necessity of an active, yet short, return of the USA to the Middle East, but Barack Obama insisted on no ground operations and the use of air power only. As part of a broad coalition of Western and Arab nations, the U.S. bombed ISIS* and, by 2019, had finally defeated it in Iraq and northwestern Syria, which was occupied by Kurdish forces allied with the U.S.; at the same time, Russia defeated ISIS* in the rest of Syria. Since 2017, under Trump, the U.S. withdrawal from the region continued; in particular, it was under his administration that the final withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan was planned, which took place quickly and chaotically under Biden, after which the Taliban once again seized power in the country.

As for Iran, Obama was relatively favorable towards the Islamic regime and even signed a nuclear deal in 2015 that called for lifting sanctions on Iran in exchange for the country abandoning the military component of its nuclear program. However, Donald Trump declared Iran the main source of instability in the region and withdrew from the deal in 2018 (even though Iran had complied with its terms), reinstating sanctions and imposing new ones. Initially, Trump did not intend to bomb Iran, but instead relied on crippling sanctions and the assassination of key figures, such as Qasem Soleimani. However, these measures led to Iran's resumption of its nuclear program and the radicalization of its foreign policy, including in terms of its confrontation with Israel. The escalation of Iranian-American relations thus dates back to Trump's first term (Emery 2025). The next president, Joe Biden, devoted relatively limited attention to the Middle East, focusing instead on the conflict in Ukraine. During his second term, Trump has intensified the US Middle East policy again, as he acts in coordination with Israel, which seeks to overthrow the Islamic regime in Iran and is pushing America toward active military operations. This was evident in the U.S.'s active participation in Israeli airstrikes against Iran in 2026, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Iran-Algeria Relations: From Tension to Mutually Beneficial Cooperation

Algeria is the largest country by population in the Arab Maghreb and the largest country in the Arab world by area (since the collapse of Sudan in 2011), which has an important geopolitical location and large oil and gas reserves. Historically, relations between Iran and Algeria have generally developed smoothly and steadily. Algeria has sought to act as a mediator in reconciling Iran with hostile states, such as Iraq and the United States, particularly in the 1980s, during the peak of Iran's confrontation with those nations. It was Algeria's mediation that facilitated the release of American hostages, staff members of the U.S. Embassy, captured by Iranian ultraconservatives in 1981 (IRNA 2018). However, in the 1990s, Iran's relations with the Algerian government deteriorated significantly, as the Algerian government suspected Iran (as well as Saudi Arabia and some other Arab countries) of aiding Islamist insurgents in the Algerian civil war. Algeria even severed diplomatic relations with Iran in 1993. However, after Mohammad Khatami, a representative of the reformist wing committed to reconciliation, com-

promise, and non-interference in the affairs of other countries, took office as president of Iran, bilateral relations returned to their previous level and even progressed further. Following a meeting between Mohammad Khatami and his Algerian counterpart, Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2000, diplomatic relations were restored. Bilateral relations developed particularly actively under the centrist and pragmatic President Hassan Rouhani; at that time, 19 memoranda of understanding were signed. Relations developed not only in economy but also in culture and the arts, particularly in the film industry (Mestufi 2023).

Algeria-Iran relations have proven resilient amid the rapid intensification, after 2011, of the seemingly long-forgotten Sunni-Shia confrontation in the Middle East, which took on a particularly fierce character in the Syrian civil war and, subsequently, in the Yemeni civil war. Algeria remained one of the few Sunni Arab states to maintain warm relations with Shiite Iran. Meanwhile, many Arab Sunni rulers and intellectuals, as well as many ordinary Arab Sunnis, viewed Iran as the main 'troublemaker' in the Arab world, after the United States and Israel (Lashina and Chikrizova 2023: 73). It was believed that Iran was carrying out the Shi'ization of Arab countries, especially Iraq and the Levant, 'by fire and sword,' through the killing and expulsion of a significant portion of Sunnis and the deliberate plunging of these countries into chaos, with the connivance of the US and other leading Western countries, which, according to some Arab publicists, are not interested in the well-being of Arabs, but only in the security of Israel (see, e.g., Al-Hamid 2024).¹

In Algeria, however, the authorities and many experts interpreted Iran's actions in the region quite differently. Expert Zidan Khwilif, in particular, explains Tehran's actions to secure political hegemony in Iraq as a desire to firmly control political processes in a country that had previously launched a full-scale armed aggression against Iran, to prevent such an event from happening again (Al Jazeera 2009). In the case of Syria, the Algerian government adopted the same stance as official Tehran, supporting Bashar al-Assad's government in restoring its authority across the entire territory and asserting that it was combating terrorism (Nurizade 2021). According to a survey conducted in 2019–2020, the percentage of Algerians who named Iran as the main threat to their country was extremely low compared to many other Arab countries – 0.5 %, compared to an average of 12 % across the Arab world, 13.4% in Egypt, 18.5 % in Iraq, and as high as 28.1 % in Saudi Arabia (Kamrava and Dorzadeh 2020: 5). However, there is an Islamist opposition in Algeria that strongly opposes Iran and its actions in the region, but it lacks significant support among the population.

It is entirely logical that Algeria, which has close ties with Russia (in many ways, its good relations with modern Russia date back to the active support provided by the USSR to the Algerian national liberation movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s) and which actively advocates for the creation of a multipolar world, has repeatedly and officially, at the presidential level, declared its desire to join BRICS (RIA Novosti 2023), which Iran has already joined. Should Algeria be admitted to this organization, Algeria-Iran relations will undoubtedly be further strengthened at all levels.

Iran-Saudi Relations: From Fierce Proxy Wars to a Reconciliation Cut Short by a New Confrontation

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have traditionally been quite tense, marked by deep mistrust and hidden, and more often than not, open rivalry. And when cooperation did arise between them, it usually came not from a sincere desire to build closer ties, but from pragmatic considerations. For instance, in November 1978, Saudi Arabia, represented by Crown Prince Saud al-Faisal, opposed the Islamic Revolution because it wanted

to preserve the monarchy in Iran (Willner 2023: 151). The Saudi authorities evidently took this position not at all out of sympathy for the Pahlavi dynasty, whose domestic policies were characterized by open hostility toward the Arab-Islamic heritage in Iranian culture, a stance that could not possibly have pleased the Saudi establishment, but rather due to the pragmatic assumption that the overthrow of the monarchy in Iran could weaken monarchical institutions throughout the region, including in Saudi Arabia itself.

The first post-revolutionary decade in Iran was marked by a sharp rise in tensions in bilateral relations, which peaked in July 1987, when 402 people were killed in clashes in Mecca, including 275 Iranian pilgrims chanting slogans against the USA and Israel, an event that was met with extreme outrage in Iran and led to an attack on the Saudi embassy and the death of a Saudi diplomat. In response, King Fahd severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in 1988 (Reuters 2023). In Saudi Arabia itself, in 1979–1980, there were numerous mass pro-Iranian demonstrations on the coast of the Persian Gulf, known as Al-Hasa and populated by Shia Arabs. The demonstrations were harshly suppressed (Piloyan and Mashkova 2022: 10). As a kind of response to an external threat – the emergence of a rival Iranian Islamist project – as well as following the hostage-taking at the Grand Mosque in Mecca by fundamentalists in the same year of 1979, the Saudi authorities in the 1980s embarked on a course of extreme conservative Islamization in all spheres of life, as a result of which the kingdom came to be perceived as a ‘sanctuary’ of archaic traditions and outdated restrictions. Significant liberalization and a shift from most archaic regulations in public life (allowing women to drive and dress freely, opening movie theaters, permitting concerts, *etc.*) occurred quite recently, in the late 2010s, thanks to the reforms of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (News.ru 2018).

In the 1990s, under the pragmatic presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, there was a kind of warming of relations; however, they never developed significantly in the years that followed – the parties viewed each other as serious rivals for influence in the Islamic world, which hindered the establishment of trusting relations.

The latest and most serious deterioration in relations so far occurred following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. At that time, Iran began to support Bashar al-Assad's government in every way possible, viewing him as a victim of a conspiracy by the West, Israel, and the Arab monarchies, including the Saudi royal dynasty. Saudi Arabia, represented by King Abdullah, on the other hand, as early as August 2011, accused the Syrian president of the mass brutal killings of unarmed demonstrators and demanded his immediate resignation (Berti and Guzansky 2012). After the situation in Syria descended into a full-scale civil war with numerous casualties on both sides in early 2012, Iran intensified its support for the Syrian government, in particular due to Türkiye's expansionist policy in the Syrian crisis, which was viewed as a direct threat. However, an even greater threat to Iran's interests was posed by Saudi Arabia's policy aimed at dismantling not only the Assad regime but also of regional organizations allied with Iran, such as Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia decided to assist certain armed groups opposing the Assad government. Thus, an indirect armed confrontation broke out between the two countries. Each side chose to support forces that shared their religious beliefs and outlook. The Saudis supported certain Islamist Sunni (and, according to Iranian researchers, radical) opposition groups, seeking to bring a Sunni government to power in Syria to achieve hegemony in the Arab world (Xodābaxši 2021: 45–62). The Iranians, as is well known, supported the Syrian government and the official army, which (at the level

of the most influential politicians and senior officers) consists mostly of Alawites – a group considered closer to Iranian Shiites than to Sunnis.

The situation reached a boiling point following the deaths of 464 Iranian pilgrims in a stampede during the Hajj in September 2015 and the execution of 47 people, including the prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Nimr al-Nimr, in January 2016. Mass anti-Saudi demonstrations took place in Iran, culminating in the destruction of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and an attack on the Saudi consulate in Mashhad. As a result, diplomatic relations were severed once again, and Iranian pilgrims stopped attending the Hajj in Mecca (Vedomosti 2016). The fierce confrontation was also evident in the level of statements by officials. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei accused the ruling Saudi dynasty of crimes against pilgrims and declared that the Islamic world must remove Islamic holy sites from its control. In response, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef stated that Iran seeks to politicize the Hajj and jeopardize its security (Regnum 2016).

In addition, a second flashpoint of indirect armed confrontation emerged between the two countries: the Yemeni civil war, where the dividing line once again ran between local Sunnis and Shiites. Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of several Arab monarchies, which had been bombing Yemeni territory since March 2015 at the request of President-elect Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Iran, meanwhile, supported the Shiite Houthi group, which controlled northern Yemen, by supplying them with weapons and missiles. Despite the far more extensive and serious intervention by the Saudi coalition (massive bombing campaigns, the deployment of ground troops, and a comprehensive blockade of Houthi territory) on the side of Yemen's Sunni forces, they failed to conquer the territories controlled by the Houthis, and the war took on a fierce, positional character. Ultimately, Yemen found itself engulfed in the world's largest humanitarian catastrophe: according to UN data, by the end of 2021, 377,000 people had died, 4.2 million had been displaced, and the majority of residents were dependent on humanitarian aid (Arab-Mir 2022).

Unlike in Yemen, the situation in Syria began to shift dramatically in favor of the current president following the launch of the Russian military operation, which was particularly successful in 2016–2017. As a result, terrorist groups were largely defeated, and the Syrian authorities, with the help of Russian airpower and pro-Iranian Shiite militias, regained control of the interior of Syria, including its major cities (Akhmedov 2018). Saudi Arabia was forced to accept this turn of events, realizing that it could no longer overthrow Assad on its own.

It must be said that, on the whole, Saudi Arabia's policy in the Syrian war was marked by extreme inconsistency: in the early years of the conflict, it sought to back the secular armed opposition, since its rivals, Qatar and Türkiye, were already supporting the Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood*. Starting from around 2014, upon seeing that the secular forces were being defeated by the Islamists, the Saudis sought out Islamist groups not under the patronage of the Qataris and Turks; finding them among the Salafi Islamists, they began to fund them generously. But as early as 2016, they gradually began to withdraw support from the groups they had previously sponsored, demanding that they should accept Russia's terms for reconciliation, lay down their arms, and either submit to the Assad government and remain in place or evacuate to Idlib. In particular, in 2018, Saudi Arabia refused to support the armed opposition in Eastern Ghouta (opposition fighters withdrew from there to Idlib), and thus ensured the swift and easy return of this important Damascus suburb to the control of the Assad government. Instead of Arab groups, the Saudis began assisting the pro-American

Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces in the Northeast (The Struggle for the Middle East... 2019: 131–153).

By the start of the third decade of the 21st century, Iran and Saudi Arabia had begun to gradually tire of such a fierce, although indirect, confrontation. In Riyadh, it gradually became clear that the country was unable to achieve victory over Iran's allied governments by military means, even with the full-scale use of combat aircraft – the resistance of the troops and the population supporting them was too strong. As a result, pragmatism prevailed in both countries, and in 2021, indirect Iran-Saudi negotiations on restoring relations began, which were held over several rounds. As bilateral tensions eased, the regional situation also became calmer. Thus, in April 2022, a ceasefire agreement was successfully concluded for the first time between the warring parties in Yemen, which the parties began to respect (Eršādi 2022).

Finally, in March 2023, an agreement was reached to restore diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh. This marked a significant positive development in the region, signaling the gradual end of bloody and destructive wars. China played a major mediating role in achieving reconciliation, as it had an interest in stabilizing the Middle East, where it had become deeply involved economically: both Iran and Saudi Arabia had become major trading partners of China in the region (Naumova 2023). In August 2023, the parties restored diplomatic relations, reopening Iran's embassies and consulate in Jeddah (Ehqāqi 2023). Furthermore, amid improving relations with Iran and the anger of Arabs and Muslims worldwide over Israel's military aggression against the Gaza Strip, the likelihood of Saudi Arabia normalizing relations with Israel, which Washington wants to see, has sharply declined (Habibi 2025). All these events clearly illustrate the growing autonomy of regional actors amid the ongoing transformation of the world order.

A particularly significant indicator of a radical shift in Saudi Arabia's regional policy is the telling fact that in recent years Riyadh has once again recognized Bashar al-Assad as the legitimate ruler of Syria, which became apparent by his invitation to the Arab League meeting in Jeddah in May 2023 by the Saudi king (IRNA 2023). All of this took place against the backdrop of a significant weakening of Riyadh's previously very high foreign policy dependence on the United States and a shift toward a more independent policy, accompanied by a noticeable strengthening of the kingdom's cooperation with Russia and China.

Unfortunately, the reconciliation did not last long: as early as late February 2026, following the start of the U.S.-Israeli aggression against Iran, the Iranian army began launching numerous missile and drone strikes on Saudi territory, targeting not only military but also civilian infrastructure, including one of the world's largest oil refineries in the city of Ras Tanura (Kurkovich 2026). This was met with a reaction from Saudi officials, who accused Iran of a gross violation of their country's sovereignty (Yeni Şafak 2026). Currently (May 2026), Iran is no longer attacking Saudi Arabia, but bilateral relations remain extremely tense, having suffered a massive setback and a complete loss of trust.

Iran and Syria: A Close Alliance with the Ousted Bashar al-Assad Government and a Sharp Confrontation with the Syrian Opposition

Syria stands out among other Arab countries for its more favorable climate (except for the southern desert regions), its unique geopolitical position in the strategic Eastern Mediterranean region, its significant ethnic and religious diversity, as well as its significantly more developed education, health care, and social welfare systems, especially when compared to North African countries, Iraq, and Yemen.

Compared to Syria, Iran is a much more cohesive state, where the population, despite its many ethnic groups, nevertheless shares a unified Iranian supranational identity. Meanwhile, the domestic political situation in Syria, along with Yemen and Lebanon, is characterized by internal instability and divisions along ethno-confessional lines (Grinin 2019: 11). Therefore, it is evident that in Iranian-Syrian relations, one can clearly identify a completely dominant party (Iran), which, until the end of 2024, effectively controlled and patronized Syria as a much weaker, internally fragmented state and far inferior to it in terms of economy and population.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Syria held a special place in Iranian foreign policy for nearly half a century. The rapprochement between Iran and Syria was driven by several important factors. First, after the 1963 revolution in Syria and especially after the 1970 coup, representatives of the Alawite minority came to dominate the country's civilian and military institutions, which constitute less than 10% of the country's population. Feeling somewhat isolated in the Arab world, the Alawite leadership set a course toward an alliance with Iranian Shiites, emphasizing their shared religious proximity. In fact, many orthodox Shiites believed that the differences between Alawite doctrines – not only from Sunni but even from Shiite ones – were so great that they could not be considered true Muslims. However, pragmatic political considerations prevailed over religious contradictions, and in 1973, the Alawites were officially recognized as a legitimate branch of Shia Islam by Musa al-Sadr, head of the Supreme Islamic Shia Council of Lebanon (Mal'tsev 2013). Moreover, the Syrian authorities were in serious competition with the Iraqi authorities – both the Syrian and Iraqi leaderships had emerged from the once-united Ba'ath Socialist Party, which subsequently split into Iraqi and Syrian wings that began to feud with one another. In this situation, Iranian Islamists found themselves closer to the Syrian authorities than the Iraqi Ba'athists. Consequently, Syria was the first country in the Arab world to recognize the new Iranian government following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. And during the Iran-Iraq War, Syria was one of the very few Arab countries to provide substantial assistance to Iran in its confrontation with Iraq. Furthermore, since Iran was unable to participate in strategic Arab alliances in the Middle East to establish a foothold in the region, it sought every way to strengthen its relations with Syria as its main ally in the Arab world (Simbar and Qāsemyān 2015).

Iran-Syria relations continued to develop rapidly in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. Iran viewed Syria as a kind of outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean and a key ally in the Arab world, which was important to Tehran given the unfriendly attitude of Saudi Arabia and some other states in the region. In addition to political and trade and economic relations, cultural ties between the two countries also developed actively. Iranian influence in Syria rose sharply during Bashar al-Assad's presidency, particularly in the late 2000s. During this period, Iran expanded its influence across all Syrian state institutions, especially the army and intelligence services, and concluded lucrative economic and military agreements with the Syrian government (Akhmedov 2023: 147). The majority of Syrians, regardless of their religion, viewed Iran positively or at least neutrally, perceiving it as an ally in the confrontation with Israel, and until 2003, also against the hostile regime of Saddam Hussein. The pro-Iranian Shiite party 'Hezbollah,' operating in southern Lebanon, also had considerable support among Syrians, especially after its de facto victory over Israel in the summer of 2006. At that time, Syria took in 120,000 refugees from southern Lebanon (mostly Shiites) whose homes had been damaged or destroyed by Israel during the war with Hezbollah (Eakin and Roth 2013).

A significant shift in how a considerable number of Syrians perceive Iran occurred after disaster struck the country and a brutal civil war broke out. First and foremost, it is important to note the deep divide in Syrian society between those who remained loyal to the government and those who supported the armed opposition (here and below, we are referring exclusively to those opposition forces and figures who are moderate or at least call themselves moderate and assert that crimes against non-Sunnis (Syrian Christians, Alawites, Druze *etc.*) are unacceptable; whereas support for radical terrorist and openly extremist forces, which are banned in Russia and many other countries, is limited within Syrian society).

Those Syrians who have remained loyal to the Assad government (they belong to a wide variety of religious groups, but, as might be expected, a particularly high percentage of regime supporters is found among the Alawites, who are most dependent on the state, and, to a lesser extent, Christians), welcomed Iran's active intervention on the government's side, believing that in this way Iran was saving the country from the atrocities of brutal terrorist mercenaries, mostly sent into Syria from abroad (see Dolgov 2021). However, opposition-minded Syrians (the overwhelming majority of whom were Sunni Muslims: predominantly Arabs, as well as Turkmen, and to some extent Kurds and others) took a completely different stance.

Since Iran threw its full weight behind the ruling regime and declared the entire armed opposition to be terrorist (which differed from Russia's more balanced approach, which distinguished between moderate and genuinely terrorist opposition), Iran's standing in the eyes of those Syrians who supported the moderate opposition forces, including among the opposition-minded intelligentsia, suffered greatly. Moreover, Iran came to be perceived by many of them as the principal destabilizing force, more dangerous than Syria's two traditional enemies, the United States and Israel. Among them, the perception emerged that Iran seeks to crush the entire Syrian opposition (in some interpretations, even to forcibly suppress all Syrian Sunni Muslims) and to forcibly impose Shiism and resettle large numbers of Shiites from other countries in Syrian cities to alter the demographic structure of the population.

Many leaders of the Syrian Sunni opposition have accused not only parts of the official Syrian army and police, but also Iranian Shiite militias and particularly Hezbollah, which entered Syria in 2013, of committing mass crimes against Syrian Sunnis. In May 2013, during the battle between the official army (supported by Hezbollah) and the opposition for the strategically important city of Al-Qusayr, Free Syrian Army commander General Salim Idris declared that he would pursue Hezbollah 'to the very gates of hell' (Mal'tsev 2013).

As for Iran's efforts to assist the Syrian government, these took the form of deploying troops from elite units of the Iranian military (the IRGC and its special operations force, Quds Force), followed by Hezbollah, as well as numerous Shiite militia groups from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which helped government forces fight the armed opposition. According to some reports, there were 60–62 Shiite units by the end of 2017. Pro-Iranian forces, in particular, played a key role in bringing Aleppo back under Syrian government control, and Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani led the defense of Damascus and its suburbs (Akhmedov 2018).

Following the launch of the Astana process to resolve the situation in Syria, which involved Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, as well as delegations from the Syrian government and the armed moderate Syrian opposition, serious disagreements emerged between Syrian opposition groups and Iran. For instance, during the November 2017 negotiations, the opposition delegation presented a draft document on the release of captured

fighters and civilian prisoners from all sides of the conflict. According to the head of the delegation, Yahya al-Aridi, Russia, Türkiye, and the UN supported the draft; however, the delegations from Iran and the official Syrian government refused to accept it, for which opposition representatives criticized the Iranian side, stating that Iran bears primary responsibility for the document's failure to be adopted (Zatari 2017).

The extremely negative attitude toward Iran among residents of the Idlib area, which, since 2015, has not been controlled by the Assad government and where the most hardline opposition fighters from all over Syria have moved with their families, can be illustrated by the fact that many of them celebrated the deaths of prominent Iranian military and political figures whom they blamed for mass hardship, suffering, and bloodshed in Syria: Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 (France 24 2020) and Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024. In contrast, many Syrians in Damascus who support the Assad government and Iran were, on the contrary, upset and concerned about how the death of the Iranian president would affect stability in Syria (Al-Monitor 2024).

Thus, Iran-Syria relations since 1979 have been extremely close and have effectively reached the level of a strategic alliance, in which Iran clearly played the leading role. Relations strengthened even further during the civil war, when Iran did everything in its power to assist the allied government and, ultimately, with Russia's help, managed to keep it in power for a certain period of time, for which both countries were thanked by the Assad government and many ordinary Syrians – supporters of the ousted regime. However, those Syrians who supported the armed opposition began to view Iran very negatively, considering it the main enemy of the Syrian people and accusing pro-Iranian Shiite militias of mass crimes against Sunni Muslims, chaos, and destruction. This was clearly evident in the Syrian armed opposition's criticism of Iran's position during the Astana process. Similarly, the Syrian opposition also began to view Hezbollah extremely negatively, accusing it not only of mass crimes but also of ingratitude: according to them, ordinary Syrian Sunnis once took in its destitute members and supporters into their homes, regardless of their religious differences, yet its forces came to Syria in response and began killing civilians and prisoners (Sunnis) on religious lines (YouTube 2013).

The allegations made by the Syrian opposition against pro-Iranian Shia militias regarding war crimes in Syria require a thorough investigation by independent and impartial experts and organizations – the Iranians themselves strongly deny all charges. At the same time, regarding claims of changes in Syria's demographic structure, according to some reports, Iranians and especially Shiites from other countries in the region had indeed begun, with the approval of the Syrian authorities, to settle en masse in certain neighborhoods of Syrian cities, particularly on the central streets and in some suburbs of Damascus (Sarabiev 2019: 42–43) – likely with the aim of permanently consolidating their positions in the country in the event of a military victory. Ultimately, by the end of 2024, Iran had managed to maintain and even significantly strengthen its position in Syria, further solidifying its alliance with the Syrian government, although a very serious divide emerged within Syrian society regarding Iran and its role in Syria.

However, due to a sharp escalation of Israeli activity in the region in the fall of 2024, Hezbollah, the Assad government's main pillar of support on the ground, was effectively crushed; even earlier, Iran had been forced to withdraw its forces or move them deeper into Syria due to constant shelling by Israel. Given the decline in strength and the reluctance to fight among a significant portion of the soldiers in the official Syrian army, which had been weakened by a very long confrontation, opposition fighters, having launched an offensive on November 27, were able to easily and almost without

resistance seize Aleppo and other major cities, and on December 8, 2024, entered Damascus, while Bashar al-Assad and his family fled the country. Forces led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham organization, which is extremely hostile toward Iran, came to power in the country. Thus, due to Israel's intervention, Iran irrevocably lost its main ally in the Arab world, as well as its land corridor for supplying Hezbollah through Syria. Immediately after the fall of the Assad government, Iran withdrew the majority of its forces from Syria to Iraq (Interfax 2025).

Iran's Relations with Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq

The following section briefly examines Iran's relations with three other major Arab countries that play a very important role in Iranian policy in the Middle East: Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq.

Iran-Egypt relations were in a state of deep crisis after 1979, when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a friend of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, was overthrown and replaced by Ayatollah Khomeini, who was outraged by Sadat's peace agreement with Israel. Relations remained strained until the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt, which began in 2011 and ended with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi coming to power in 2013. Under the latter, relations with Iran began to improve gradually, partly because both countries adopted similar positions on Syria: Egypt now also began to support the Assad government (for more on Iran-Egypt relations in recent decades, see Khodunov 2025). During the early years of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's presidency, bilateral relations developed very slowly. However, after Ebrahim Raisi came to power (2021), bilateral relations began to develop rapidly, a trend reflected in the Iranian state media, which, when mentioning Iran and Egypt together from August 2021 to August 2023, referred to the normalization and restoration of relations in 32 % of cases (by comparison, between January 2014 and July 2021, the word 'normalization' was used in only 5 % of mentions of Iran-Egypt relations). The new relationship was built on mutual respect, intensified economic cooperation, and a shared approach to regional issues, particularly Israel's war in the Gaza Strip. The Saudi-Iran reconciliation in March 2023 opened the way for even more intensive development of relations, as Egypt is economically dependent on Saudi Arabia. As early as September 2023, Iranian Minister of Finance and Economy Ehsan Khandouzi and his Egyptian counterpart Mohamed Maait discussed specific financial and economic projects and potential investments for the first time in many years (Filin and Samoilova 2024: 239–241). After Iran and Egypt joined BRICS, relations received an additional boost for development.

As for Iran's relations with Yemen, before the upheavals of 2014, the ties between the two countries were generally stable but not particularly active. Since 2014, Iran has actively sought to strengthen its ties with the Houthis, who have established control over the predominantly Shia regions of northwestern Yemen. According to some reports, which have not been officially confirmed by Iran, Tehran supplied the Houthis with weapons and drones, helping them to resist Saudi Arabia (Mil'chenko 2019). After the war in Gaza began, Iran officially expressed support for the Houthis' attacks on Israel and the blockade of the Red Sea, stating that these actions were aimed at protecting the oppressed Palestinian people, but denied any involvement in them (Alef 2023).

Iran-Iraq relations were initially overshadowed by Iraq's brutal aggression against Iran, which inflicted heavy damage on Iranian border towns and claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people on both sides. Relations remained extremely hostile until Saddam Hussein was overthrown by the Americans in 2003. However, beginning in 2004, Iran rapidly consolidated its influence in a weakened and defeated Iraq, effec-

tively bringing Tehran-aligned Shiites to power. Sunni Arabs, particularly officers and members of the Ba'ath Party, were simultaneously excluded from positions of power in Iraq, which displeased them and ultimately led to the radicalization of a segment of Sunnis and the emergence of ISIS*, which seized significant territories in Iraq and advanced toward Baghdad, a group against which Iran actively fought. Currently, Iran's influence in Iraq remains very significant, particularly because Tehran effectively controls the largest military formation in Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which, in 2016, at the height of the fight against terrorism, numbered 142,000 personnel (Minyazhetdinov 2017). Of course, not all Iraqi prime ministers have been entirely loyal to Iran – for example, former Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani (2022–2025) pursued a policy that was more neutral and pragmatic, which irritated Tehran, which had bet on the far more loyal Nouri al-Maliki, who had close ties to the PMF. However, the United States, which retains a certain degree of influence in Iraq, objected to his candidacy: the Trump administration threatened to cut off aid to Iraq if al-Maliki were elected. This risks turning Iraq into yet another battleground – a political one, though even an armed conflict cannot be ruled out – between Tehran and Washington. Iraqi Sunnis also oppose al-Maliki, as they felt particularly vulnerable under his rule (Boltuc 2026).

So, despite the weakened position of the regime within Iran itself following the war with Israel and the recent massive protests, the Islamic regime in Tehran apparently counts on the support and protection of Arab Shiites from the now-friendly Iraq to remain in power. Thus, in terms of having the largest and most loyal base of sincere supporters, it is Iraq that has emerged as the key link in Iran's 'axis of resistance.' And even the loss of Syria has not led to a radical weakening of the Islamic regime, which retains firm control over a colossal demographic and geopolitical resource – Iraqi Arab Shiites. Among them, of course, not all support subordination to Tehran, and some Shiite Arabs are, on the contrary, ardent supporters of Pan-Arabism. But a significant number of them are undoubtedly loyal supporters of the Islamic regime, ready to fight for it, and will prove themselves in the future development of the geopolitical confrontation in the region.

The U.S. and Israel's War with Iran and a New Phase in Iran's Relations with Arab Countries

During the 12-day Iran–Israel war in June 2025, Israel caused very significant damage to Iran's nuclear and military facilities, including the killing of 15 Iranian nuclear scientists. Iran, however, was able to inflict only limited damage on Israel, as the overwhelming majority of its missiles were intercepted by Israel's air defense system (Borger 2025). On 28 February 2026, Israel launched a new and much larger-scale war against Iran. Whereas U.S. involvement in the war against Iran in June 2025 had been limited, this time, by the decision of President Trump, it became full-scale. Although the Islamic regime managed to survive, the damage inflicted on Iran was enormous. Among other things, key figures of the Islamic regime were killed in unexpected airstrikes, including Supreme Leader A. Khamenei, Chief of the General Staff A. Mousavi, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) M. Pakpour, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council A. Larijani, and others. Numerous military and nuclear facilities across the country were destroyed, while the civilian population also suffered heavily. Although Iran's retaliatory attacks against Israel proved more destructive than those carried out in 2025, Iran nevertheless failed to inflict damage on Israel comparable to that suffered by Iran itself, let alone on the United States. However, it was able to un-

dertake significant retaliatory measures by blocking the Strait of Hormuz, which triggered a sharp rise in global oil prices and had a substantial impact on the world economy. Progress in negotiations was achieved only by April 8, when, through the mediation of the Pakistani authorities, the parties agreed on a two-week ceasefire, with Iran agreeing to reopen the Strait of Hormuz for that period (Evtodyeva 2026). Negotiations are continuing into May. Although the ceasefire agreement was extended and military operations have largely ceased since early April, Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz remains in place, as does the U.S. naval blockade of Iran. The situation remains highly uncertain.

Unable to significantly weaken the military power of the aggressors, Israel and the United States, Iran subjected the military and even economic infrastructure of the neighboring Arab states of the Persian Gulf to prolonged and powerful attacks, viewing them as loyal American allies. These actions provoked an angry response from the governments of the Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan accused Iran of attacking not only his country but also many other neighboring Muslim states (Yeni Şafak 2026). The League of Arab States also strongly condemned the Iranian attacks. In response to Saudi protests, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei stated that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states were providing their territory, military bases, and other facilities for criminal U.S.-Israeli attacks, which, according to him, explained Iran's response (Pars Today 2026). Thus, the fragile Iranian-Saudi rapprochement, achieved only recently, was once again shattered, and rebuilding trust will be extraordinarily difficult. It must be emphasized, however, that had it not been for the U.S.-Israeli aggression, Iran would under no circumstances have resorted to such desperate actions against its Arab neighbors, and peace between them would have continued. In this sense, Israel once again played the role of a major destabilizing force in the region, creating the conditions for the renewal of hostility between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

In any case, while the outcome of the military campaign against Iran remains unclear, it is evident that this war will profoundly reshape regional relations, particularly Iran's relations with the Arab countries.

Conclusion

The evolution of Iran's relations with Arab countries over the past two decades must be examined in the context of the transformation of the contemporary world order, a process that accelerated significantly from 2022 (Grinin 2023a; Grinin, Grinin, and Korotayev 2024). In the Middle East, however, the struggle to reshape the existing regional order began much earlier, during the Arab revolutions of 2011, which effectively marked the beginning of the global reconfiguration process (Grinin 2016). Overall, these developments have been characterized by the weakening of the role of the United States and its allies, alongside the growing influence of Russia and China in the region, as well as the increasing role of regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye, all of which have pursued considerably more independent foreign policies.

As for Iran's relations with Algeria, they remained stable and steady throughout the period under consideration, as the Algerian authorities and a significant part of Algerian society are sympathetic toward Russia and Iran. Iran-Saudi relations were particularly tense during the 2010s, at the height of the armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen, where the two states supported opposing sides. Beginning in 2023, however, Tehran and Riyadh restored diplomatic relations. Concerning Syria, Iran (along with Russia) provided substantial assistance to the government of Bashar al-Assad, enabling it to remain in

power for thirteen years. However, the Syrian armed opposition, concentrated in the Idlib region and having taken power in December 2024, continues to display deep hostility toward Iran and its regional influence. At present, it remains virtually the only significant anti-Iranian force in the Middle East alongside Israel.

The rapprochement among major Middle Eastern states and their growing influence on regional affairs has taken place in the context of strengthening cooperation with international coalitions, above all BRICS, which already includes Iran, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates as legitimate members, while Algeria remains a candidate for membership. Iran, in particular, has developed especially close ties with major Eurasian organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, Israel's sharp escalation of its regional activities beginning in the autumn of 2024 reversed the process of expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East and even resulted in the elimination of Tehran's principal ally in the form of the Assad government.

Most recently, repeated Iranian attacks on the infrastructure of the monarchies of the Persian Gulf have led to a significant deterioration in Iran's relations with the Arab world. As a result, Iran's image within Arab societies may be deteriorating to some extent; however, many Arabs sympathize with the suffering of the Iranian people caused by the extensive bombing campaigns carried out by the United States and Israel.

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NOTES

* Organization is banned in Russia.

¹ It should be noted in this regard that within Iran itself, there are forces, represented primarily by radical Persian chauvinists, who hold an extremely negative attitude toward the Arab people and the Islamic religion. They consider the Arabs a savage and barbaric people, blame the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century for the destruction of the 'greatest' pre-Islamic Iranian civilization, and advocate the complete, violent 'cleansing' of Iranian culture of everything associated with Arabs and Islam, including the elimination of all Arabic loanwords, despite the fact that they constitute more than half of the vocabulary of the modern Persian language (Filin, Khodunov 2019: 139). Of course, under the current Islamic regime, which respects the contribution of Arabs to Iranian culture, these forces operate clandestinely and illegally. However, they still manage to spread their propaganda of racism and hatred toward Arabs and Islam among opposition-minded urban youth in Iran through social media.

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