



**In the Name of God**  
**Institute of Islamic World Future Studies**  
**Special Report No. 15**  
**The View of Iranian Elites on Iran-Saudi Relations**

## **Introduction**

Iran and Saudi Arabia are two key players and rivals in the West Asia region, and in a larger area, in the geographical and ideological domain of the Islamic world. The relations between the two countries have always been a serious vicissitude. Before the Islamic Revolution, the two countries formed the bases of United States' authority and power in the region, based on the Nixon Doctrine. Iran played the role of the military pillar and Saudi Arabia as the economic pillar. The occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran collapsed one of the pillars of this doctrine, and in addition to regional equations, the equations between the two countries underwent major changes. The different approaches of the two countries in regional and global issues, the transformation of the two countries as symbols of the Shiite and Sunni religious poles, positions on relations with the United States and the Zionist regime, etc., generally led to a not so positive relationship between the two countries, and in some cases led to tension. The peak of tension between the two countries can be seen in the 1987 Mecca incident, the Mina Disaster in 2015, the execution of Sheikh Nimir in Saudi Arabia and the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, which ultimately led to breaking off the diplomatic relations between the two countries. In recent years, the emergence of regional crises such as the Syrian crisis, Saudi Arabia's invasion of Yemen, the Qatari crisis, and ... have also made the open and hidden tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia more distinct.

The importance of the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the numerous questions raised by the scientific and executive community about the reasons and causes of tension, and the prospect of relations between the two countries, led us to ask the opinion of a number of Iranian elites in the field of political science and international relations in executive and academic areas about the "Iranian elite's perspective on Iran-Saudi relations". The special report No. 15 of Islamic World Future Studies has been allocated to the interpretation of the results of these polls.

## **Statistical Population**

The target statistical community was the executive and academic staff of foreign policy. Therefore, this survey was sent to individuals involved in foreign policy in the State Department, professors of political science, international relations and geography of the universities of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti, Tarbiat Modarres, and a number of researchers related to this field.

Of the 75 poll participants, 23% of the participants were from the executive area and 77% were university researchers and professors. 85% of the participants were educated in political sciences



and international relations, and 15% were from other fields (political geography, law, etc.). 54% of the participants had a doctorate, 37% had a master's degree and 9% had a bachelor's degree.

## Interpretation of Results

### 1. High importance of Iran-Saudi relations for Iranian elites:

The first question asked was the extent to which changes in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were important to them and how much they followed the news? Using Likert scale, respondents were asked to express their opinion. The results showed that about 86.7% of the participants actively pursue changes in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and for 62.6% of the Iranian elites, these relations are of high importance. None of the respondents voted for low and very low options.

Spectrum number	The corresponding answer	Frequency	Percentage Frequency
1	Very low	0	0
2	Low	0	0
3	Average	10	13/3
4	High	18	24
5	Very high	47	62/7

### 2. The fundamental dispute between the two countries: the attempt to become the main regional power

As already mentioned, Iran and Saudi Arabia have fundamental disputes in different areas. With expert work, four fundamental differences (different interpretations from political Islam and the type of government, the Shiite and Sunni religious differences, the Arab/Non-Arab identity differences, and the attempt to become the main regional power) were left to judgment by the participants, to rank the priorities from 1 to 4.

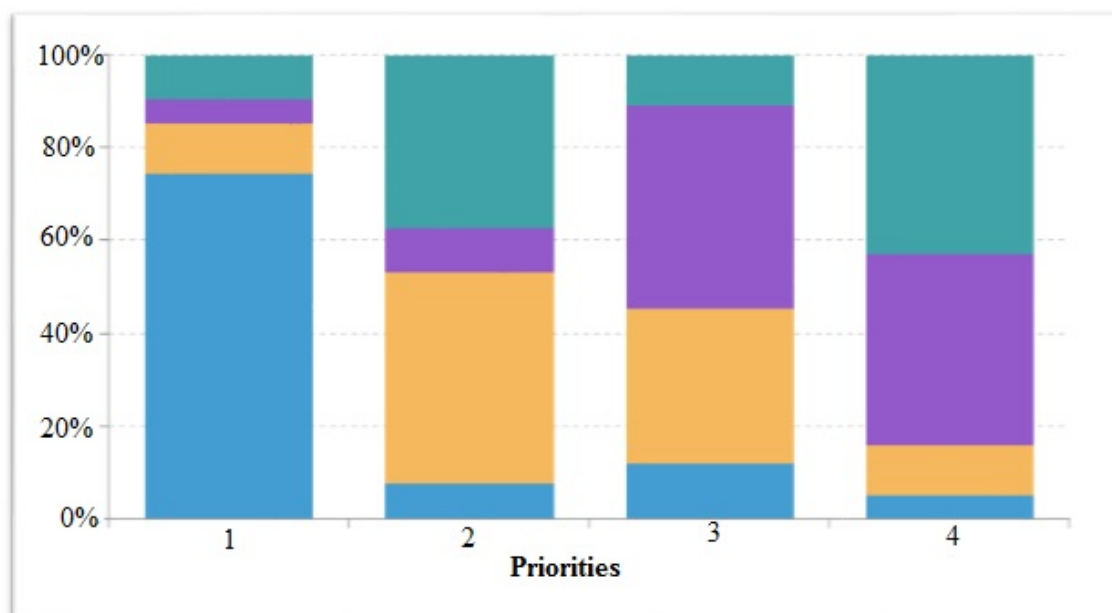
The results showed that 75 percent of participants considered the first priority in the fundamental differences in Iran-Saudi relations as "the two sides' attempts to become the main regional power," and only 11 percent opted for Shiite and Sunni differences as the first option. 9% of the people considered the difference in the type of government and the various interpretations of political Islam, and 5% of the participants chose Arab/Non-Arab identity differences as the first priority of the disputes. Considering the priority distribution of the option of "attempt to become the main regional power" among the rankings of one to four priorities, it was ranked by 75% as the first priority, 8% as the second priority, 12% as the third priority, and 5% as the fourth priority, that ultimately this option, with an average rating of 1.48, was considered the forefront of the disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia from the view of the Iranian elites.



The "Shia- Sunni religious difference" with the average rating of 2.44 was ranked second in the overall ranking. 11% chose this option as the first priority, 45% as the second priority, 33% as the third priority, and 11% as the fourth priority.

Another option was the "type of government and interpretation of political Islam", which is somehow derived from the Shiite and Sunni religious differences and it is of close nature with the second option. With a slight difference with the second option and the average rating of 2.87, it was ranked third in the ranking. 9% of the respondents chose this option as the first priority, 37% as the second priority, 11% as the third priority, and 43% as the fourth priority.

The " Arab/Non-Arab identity differences" also ranked fourth in the fundamental disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the average rating of 3.21. 5% of respondents considered this option as the first priority, about 10% as the second priority, 44% as the third priority and 41% as the fourth priority.



- The two countries' attempt to become the main regional power
- The Shiite and Sunni religious differences
- Different interpretations from political Islam and the type of government
- The Arab/Non-Arab identity differences

### 3. Syria, the most important area of competition for Iran and Saudi Arabia

The next question from the participants was that in the order of priority, which country (Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon or other Gulf countries) they considered as the most important area of regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia?



Studying the results of the polls and the distribution of the areas of competition as a matter of priority indicates that Syria is the most important area of competition between the two countries from the view of the Iranian elites. 51% of participants selected Syria as the first priority, 28% chose Yemen, 15% Iraq, 4% Lebanon, 1% Bahrain and 1% chose other the Gulf countries as the first priority. In the overall ranking of priorities of the regional competitions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, after Syria which was ranked the most important area of competition with the highest rank of 1.33, Yemen became second with an average rating of 2.49, with a close proximity Iraq, with an average of 2.56, was in the third place, Lebanon with an average of 3.77 in the fourth place, Bahrain with an average of 4.47 in the fifth priority and the other Gulf countries, with an average of 5.77 were in the sixth place of the ranking.

Option/ priority	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average rate
Syria	38	16	12	6	3	0	1.93
Yemen	21	12	29	11	1	1	2.49
Iraq	11	31	20	8	3	2	2.56
Lebanon	3	9	9	39	11	4	3.77
Bahrain	1	7	3	11	51	2	4.47
other Gulf countries	1	0	2	0	6	66	5.77

#### **4. Saudi Arabia's lobbying power in the United States, as the most important threat against Iran**

The next question from the participants was that what do they consider as the most important Saudi threat against Iran in terms of priority? According to expert question designers, six basic options (large military budget and arms purchases - the power of lobbying in the United States - the relationship with the Zionist regime - economic power and involvement in the oil market at the expense of Iran - provoking and supporting the opposition outside Iran for regime change-provocation and support for Iran's internal turmoil) were selected to be prioritized by the survey participants, which the results are as follows:

47% of the participants considered "Saudi Arabia's lobbying power in the United States" as the top priority for Saudi Arabia's threat against Iran and 37% placed it in the second priority. In other words, 84% of the frequency of this option was in the first and second priorities of Saudi Arabia's threat to Iran. The average rating of this option is 1.77, which has a significant difference with the second priority with an average score of 2.97.

"Large military budget and arms purchases" with an average rating of 2.97 was ranked second in Saudi Arabia's priority of threats to Iran. 27% of the respondents placed it at the top of the threat,

17% in the second priority, 20% in the third priority, 13% in the fourth priority, 13% in the fifth priority and 10% in the sixth priority.

"Relations with the Zionist regime" with an average of 3.21 was chosen as the third priority, "economic power and intervention in the oil market at the expense of Iran" as the fourth priority with an average rating of 3.4, "the provocation and support of the opposition outside Iran for regime change" with an average of 4.51 as the fifth priority and "instigating and supporting Iran's internal turmoil" with an average rating of 5.6 as the sixth priority of Saudi threats against Iran. The results are as follows.

Option / priority	1	2	3	4	5	6	total	Average rate
Saudi Arabia's lobbying power in the United States	35	28	7	4	1	0	75	1.77
Large military budget and arms purchases	20	13	15	10	10	7	75	2.97
Relations with the Zionist regime	6	17	31	6	6	9	75	3.21
economic power and intervention in the oil market at the expense of Iran	11	13	12	14	24	1	75	3.4
the provocation and support of the opposition outside Iran for Iran's regime change	0	4	9	30	18	17	75	4.51
instigating and supporting Iran's internal turmoil	3	0	4	11	16	41	75	5.13

### 5. The regional power and influence of Iran, as the most important threat against Saudi Arabia

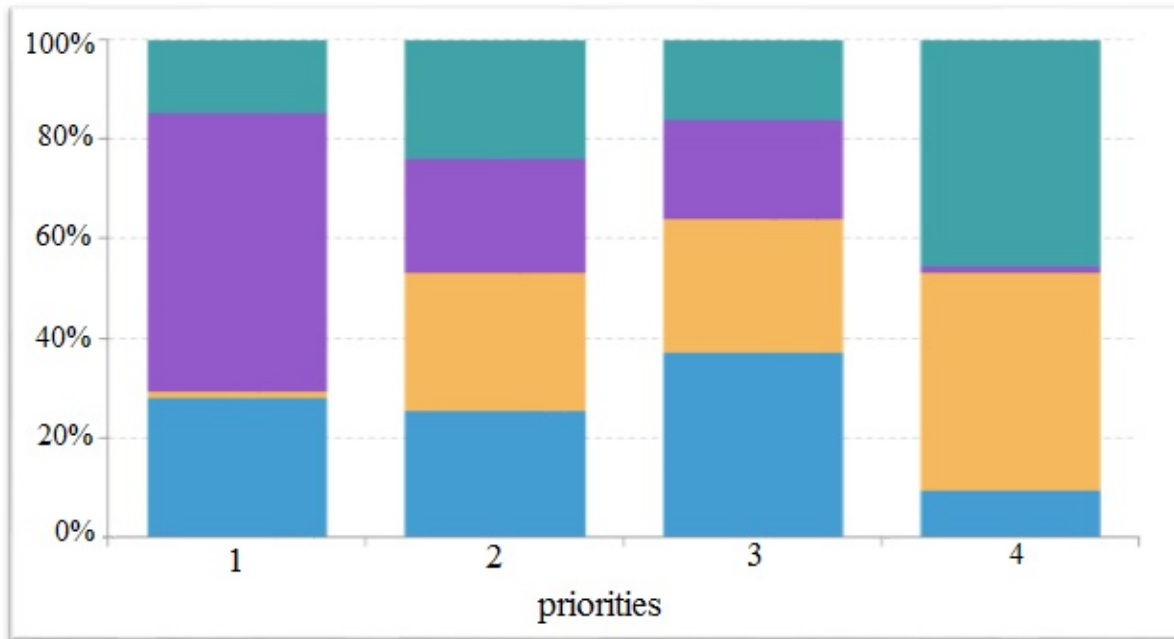
The participants were asked what options they considered as the most important threat of Iran against Saudi Arabia? The four basic options (nuclear capability and knowledge - Iran's missile power - Iran's regional power and influence - the improvement of US-Iran relations) were put to the polls to be prioritized by the participants.

According to some of the Iranian elites who participated in the poll, "Iran's regional power and influence" is Iran's most important threat against Saudi Arabia. 56% of the respondents chose this option as the first priority, 23% as the second priority, 20% as the third priority and 1% as the fourth priority of Iran's threat against Saudi Arabia, and this option was ranked as Iran's most important threat against Saudi Arabia with an average rate of 1.67.

"Iran's missile power" ranked second with an average of 2.28, "improvement of Iran-US relations" with an average of 2.92 in the third place, and "Iran's nuclear capability and



knowledge" with an average of 3.13 was in the fourth place of Iran's most important threat against Saudi Arabia.



- Iran's missile power
- Iran's nuclear capability and knowledge
- Improvements in Iran-US relations
- Iran's regional power and influence

### 6. Saudi's role in US's withdrawal from JCPOA

Another question from the participants was to what extent did Saudi Arabia influence USA's withdrawal from JCPOA? By using the Likert scale, respondents were asked to express their opinion using the options of very weak/no role, weak, moderate, strong, very strong.

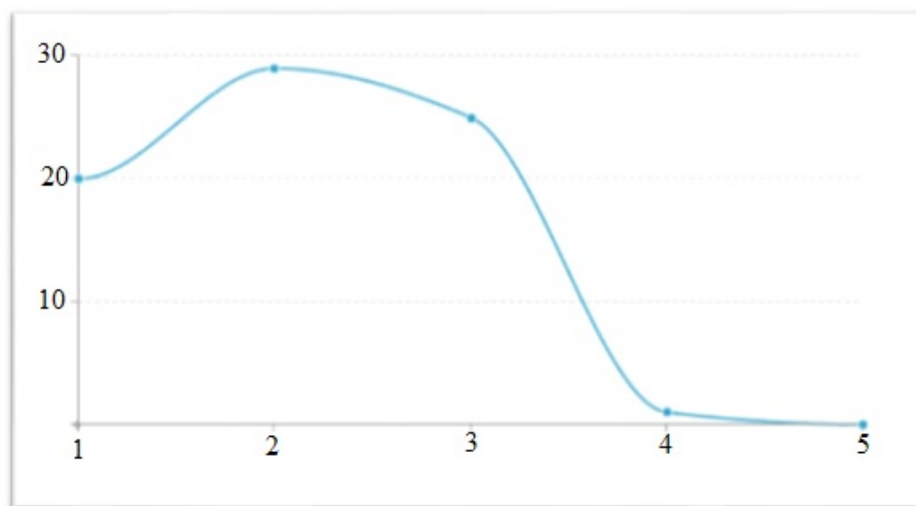
24% of the respondents believed that Saudi Arabia's influence in US's withdrawal was "very strong". 21.3% of respondents believed that Saudi Arabia played a "strong" role in United States' withdrawal. 40% believed that Saudi Arabia's influence was "moderate". 8% believed Saudi Arabia had a "weak" role in USA's withdrawal from JCPOA. In the end, 6.7% believed that the role of Saudi Arabia was very weak or it had no role at all.

Spectrum number	Frequency	Frequency percentage
1	5	6.7%
2	6	8%
3	30	40%
4	16	21.3%
5	18	24%
total	75	100%

### 7. Saudi Arabia's low tendency to negotiate with Iran

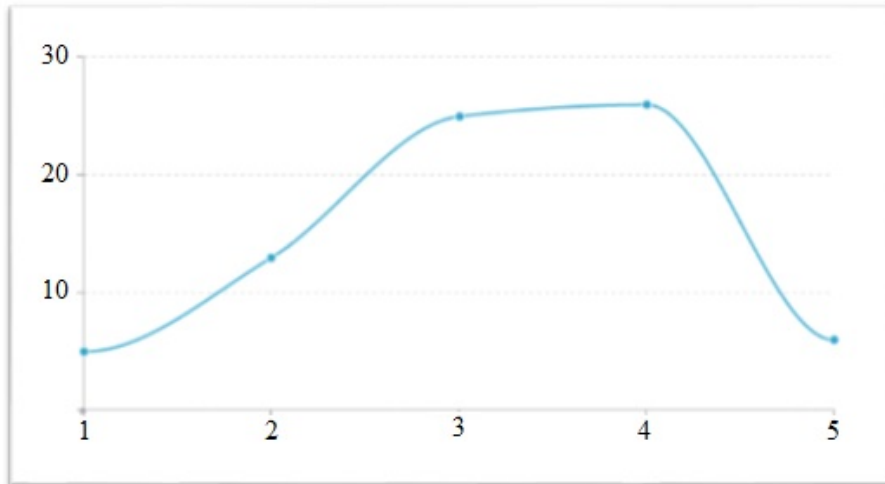
Participants were asked to what extent Saudi Arabia is willing to negotiate with Iran?

26.6 percent of the respondents voted for "very weak / unwilling" option, 38.7 percent voted for the "weak" option, 33.3 percent for the "moderate" option and 1.3 percent for the "high" option. Nobody voted for "very high" on this question. According to 65.4% of Iranian elites, Saudi Arabia has little tendency to negotiate with Iran. The following chart shows the frequency of responses.



### 8. Iran is more willing to negotiate.

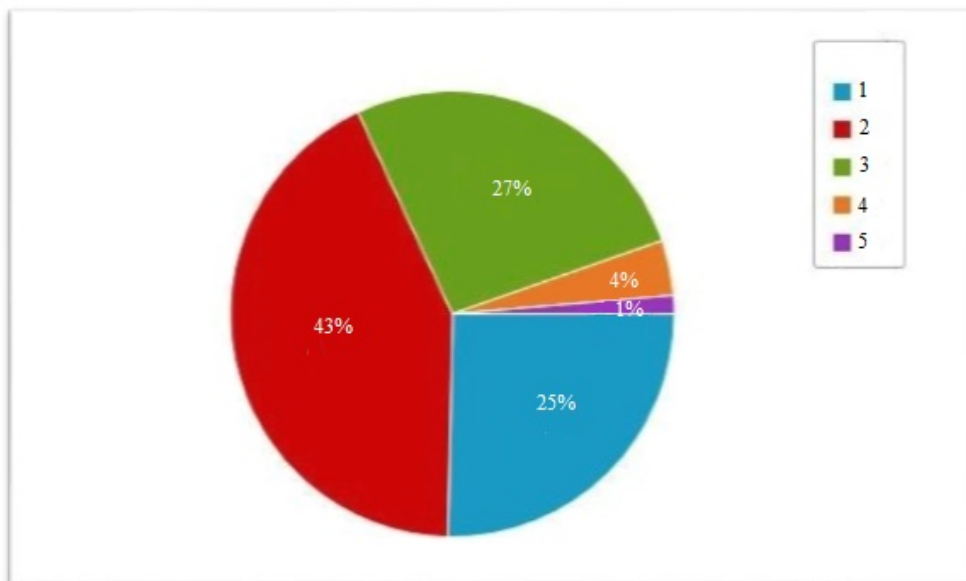
In contrast to the previous question, this time participants were asked to what extent Iran is willing to negotiate with Saudi Arabia, 7.6% of the participants voted for the "very weak / unwilling" option, 17.3% for the "weak" option, 33.3% voted for the moderate" option and 34.7% voted for the "high" option, and finally, 8% voted for the "very high" option. In other words, 76% of respondents consider Iran's willingness to negotiate with Saudi Arabia more than average, and 42.7% consider Iran's willingness to be high and very high.



**9. The low possibility of a direct negotiation between the two countries**

After examining the willingness of the two countries to negotiate, it was questioned to what extent in the current situation is it possible to have direct negotiations (without mediators) between the two countries? Participants expressed their opinions using the options of 1 meaning very low to 5 meaning very high.

25% of the participants voted for a very low possibility of a direct negotiation, 43% voted for the low option, 27% for the moderate option, 4% for the high option, and only 1% for very high option. In other words, 67% of the participants consider the possibility of a direct negotiation very low, and only 5% are optimistic about it.



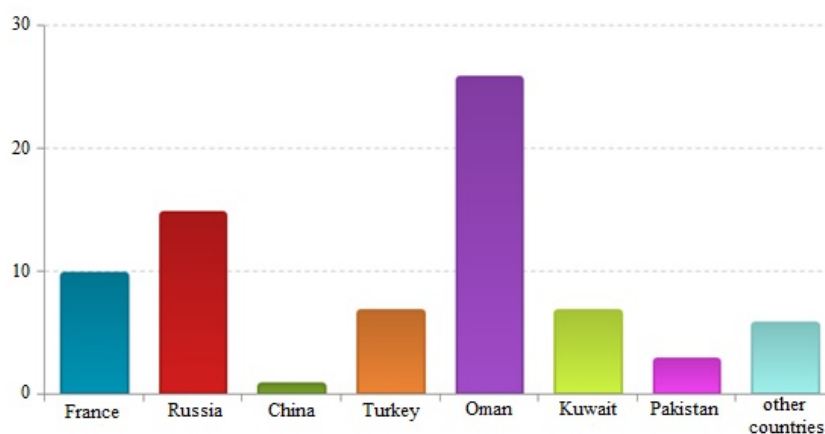




### 10. Oman, Proposal for Mediation

Participants were asked if the conflict between the two countries could be resolved in the presence of a mediator country, which country (Russia, China, France, Turkey, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan or other countries) would be more appropriate to be the mediator?

34.7% of the participants (26 out of 75 participants) considered Oman a better option for mediation. After Oman, Russia, with 20%, was considered as the second option and France, with 13.3%, as the third option. The frequency of the response to each of the options (the number of times each country was selected as a mediator) can be seen in the table below.



### 11. Effect of Saudi relations with America and Zionist Regime on adopting hostile positions toward Iran

One of the important variables in the study of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the influence of relations with other players on the relations between the two countries. In the poll, the most serious hostile players against Iran, the United States and the Zionist regime, were examined, and the following question was raised; to what extent do you think Saudi Arabia's hostile attitude toward Iran is affected by Saudi-USA relations? The same question was repeated about Saudi relations with the Zionist regime. (1: very weak / unaffected until 5: very strong)

Poll results indicate that according to the responses of the Iranian elites, the effect of the Saudi's relationship with the United States is more than the influence of Saudi-Israel relations on adopting a hostile attitude towards Iran by Saudi Arabia.

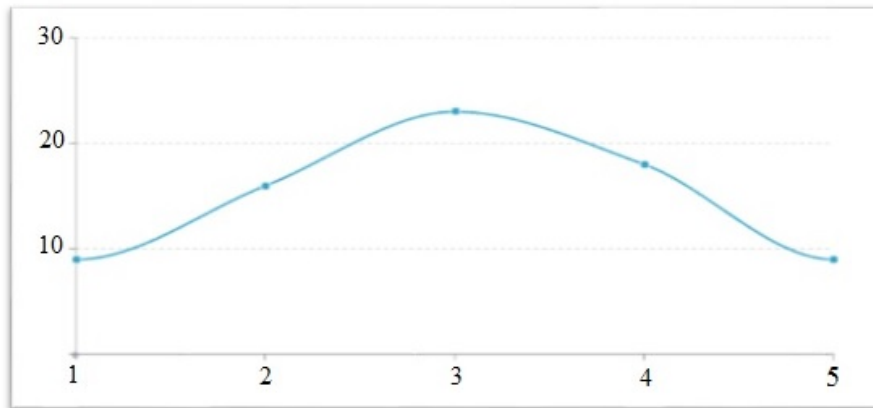
The 26.7% of the elites who participated in the survey considered the influence of Saudi-USA relations on adopting hostile positions by Saudi toward Iran "very strong", 24% considered this effect "strong", 37.3% "moderate", 8% "weak" and 4% considered it "very weak". In other words, only 12% do not consider any influence or consider a very weak influence for the relations with the United States on adopting hostile positions by Saudi towards Iran. From the



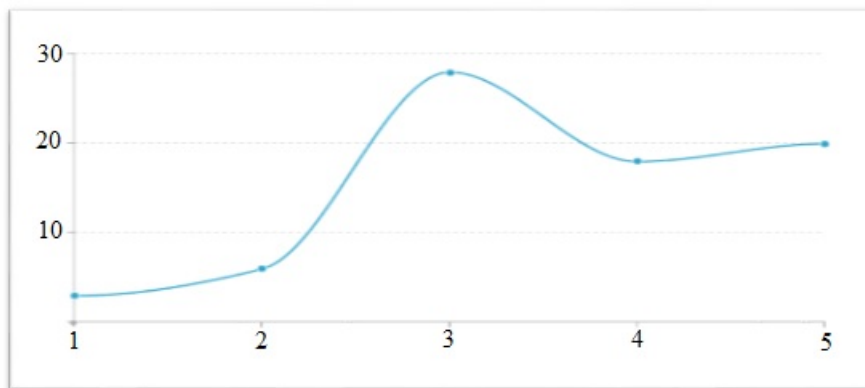
view of 88%, these relations have an effective (moderate and upward) role in the Saudi's approach to Iran and 50.7% consider this influence very serious (strong and very strong).

But regarding the impact of Saudi-Zionist relations on Saudi's hostile attitude toward Iran, 12% considered it "very strong", 24% "strong", 30.7% "moderate", 21.3% "weak" and 12% considered it "very weak". In fact, 66.7% believed these relationships are effective (moderate to high), but unlike United States, less than half of the participants, about 36%, consider a very serious impact (strong or very strong) for the role of Saudi-Israeli relations on adopting hostile attitudes toward Iran. The comparison of the two frequencies of responses for these two questions can be useful for a better understanding of the subject.

**The impact of relations with the Zionist regime**



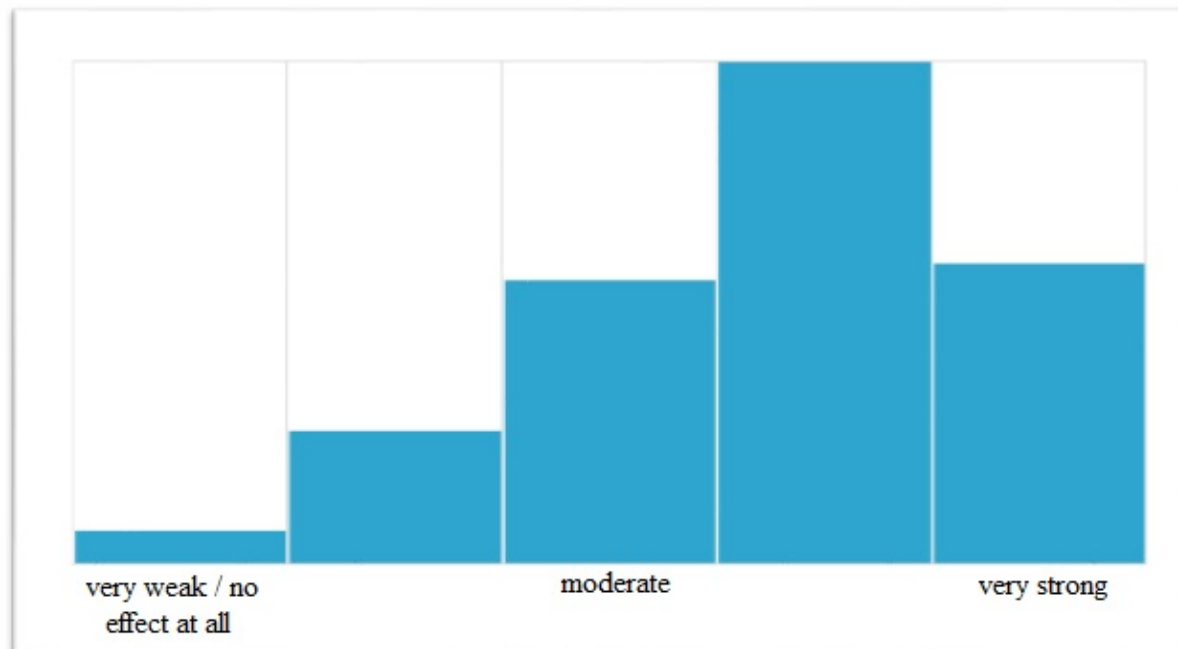
**The impact of relations with the United States**



## 12. Effective role of Saudi policies in creating tension between the two countries

The next question was about the role of Saudi **policies**. Participants were asked how much do you think Saudi policies are effective in creating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia? (1:very weak / unaffected to 5: very strong)

64% of respondents blamed the tensions between the two countries on Saudi Arabia. 24% rated Saudi politics' effect as "very strong" and 40% considered this effect as "strong" in creating tensions between the two countries, with the highest frequency of responses by being selected 30 times. 22.7% also considered a "moderate" effect for Saudi policies. 10.7% considered this role as being "weak" and 2.6% considered it "very weak". In the table below, you can see the frequency of responses to different options.



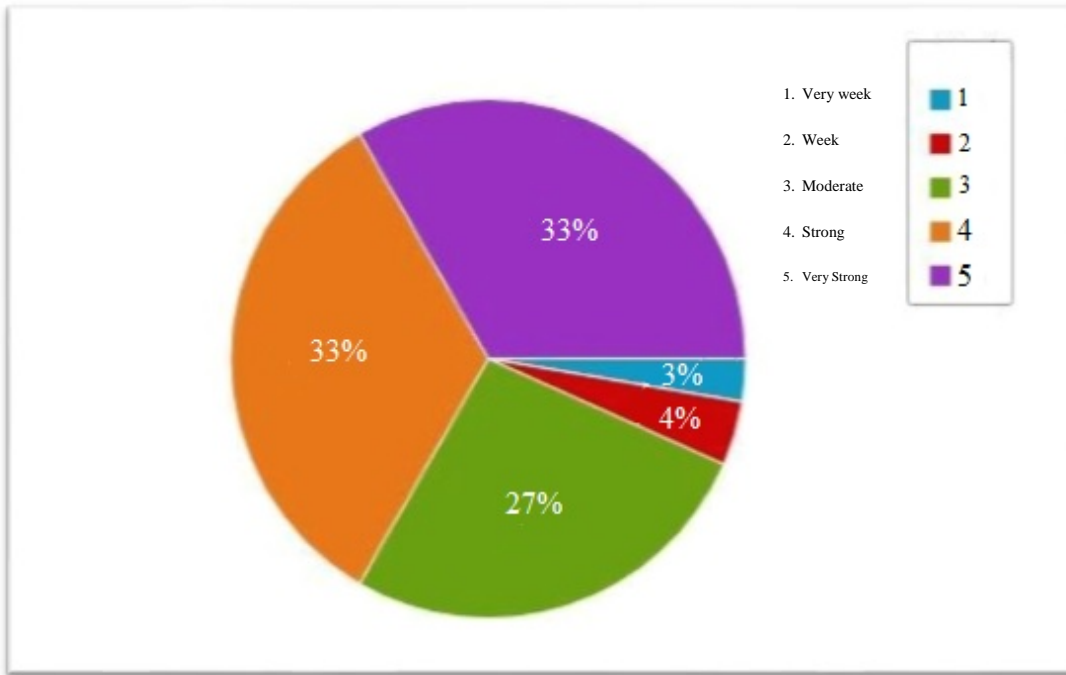
## 13. Effective role of Saudi Arabia's current rulers in the hostile positions of Saudi Arabia towards Iran

Despite the fact that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were not usually tension-free, it seemed that during the time of current Saudi rulers (King Salman, and his crown prince Mohammed bin Salman), the country's stances have become more severe than before. In order to assess the issue from the point of view of the Iranian elites, the question was raised to what extent Saudi Arabia's hostile policies toward Iran are influenced by the current rulers of Saudi Arabia? (1: very weak / unaffected until 5: very strong)

93% of respondents assessed the role of current Saudi rulers in Saudi's hostile positions toward Iran as being moderate and upward. Of the total responses, 33% rated this role as "very strong",



33% "strong" and 27% rated it as "moderate." The following chart shows the frequency of responses.



#### 14. The Effect of Improvement of Iran-Saudi Relations on Iran's Relations with other Arab Countries

Saudi Arabia is an important player in the Arab world. Particularly, for some small Arabic countries, it is in the position of a godfather or an older brother. Participants in the survey were questioned how effective is Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia on the improvement of relations between Iran and other Arab countries? (1: very weak / unaffected until 5: very strong)

Almost all of the respondents (98.7%) assessed the impact of improved relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the improvement of Iran's relations with other Arab countries as being effective (moderate to strong) and 88% considered it to have a serious effect (strong and very strong). This illustrates the need for efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia to restore relations in the Arab world. The frequency of responses can be seen in the chart below.

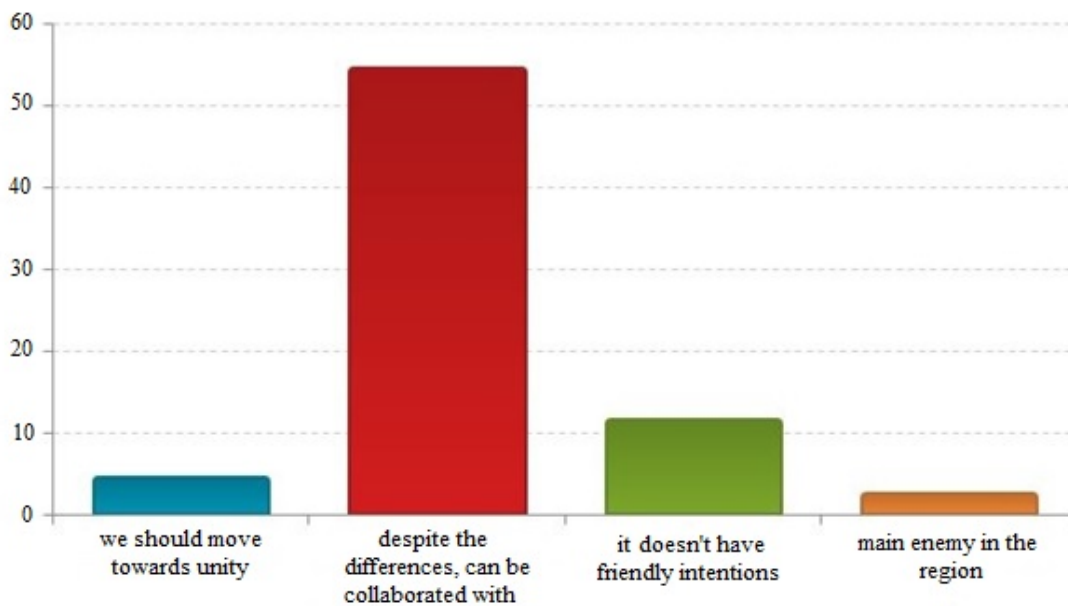
Spectrum number	Frequency	Frequency percentage
1	1	1.3%
2	0	0%
3	8	10.7%
4	25	33.3%
5	41	54.7%



### 15. Saudi Arabia, potential cooperative competitor

Eventually, this question was asked from the participants, that regardless of the current challenge between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which option is most probably closer to your view of Saudi Arabia? Is it a Muslim and brother country that Iran should move towards unity with it? Or is it Iran's main regional enemy? Is it a country that is not friendly to Iran and Iran should be cautious? Or a regional rival that, despite the differences, can be collaborated with?

According to 73.3% of the Iranian elites who participated in the survey, Saudi Arabia is a rival country in the region, which, despite the differences, can be collaborated with. In fact, the main participants in this survey had a moderate view of Saudi Arabia, and they thought it is possible to cooperate with Saudi Arabia. 6.7% had a positive view of Saudi Arabia and considered it a Muslim and brother country that they should move towards unity together. 16% believed Saudi Arabia does not have friendly intentions to Iran and Iran should be cautious, and 4% considered Saudi Arabia the main enemy of Iran. The frequency of responses to various options is visible from the 75 participants in the table below.



The End.