OPEN PEER REVIEW

The Logic of Interest Alignment and Regional Coalition-Building in the Persistence of Iran–U.S. Hostility: A Structural Neorealist Analysis of Israel and Saudi Arabia

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The sentence “Accordingly, the objective of this article is to explain the logic through which the alignment of Israeli and Saudi interests and the formation of regional balancing relationships contribute to the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility within the framework of structural neorealism” clearly states the research objective, but the manuscript needs an explicit research question immediately before or after it. The article would benefit from stating a primary question such as how and through what mechanisms Israeli and Saudi interest convergence contributes to the reproduction of Iran–U.S. confrontation. Two subordinate questions could differentiate the cases: what interests encourage Israeli balancing against Iran, and what interests explain Saudi balancing, hedging, and accommodation? A clearly formulated question would improve correspondence among the research problem, theoretical framework, empirical analysis, and conclusion.

The article currently lacks a sufficiently developed methodology section, even though the Introduction briefly refers to a “descriptive-analytical” orientation. Since the manuscript is derived from documentary and library-based research, the authors must specify how evidence was selected and analyzed. The revision should explain the study period, inclusion criteria for documents and secondary sources, the rationale for selecting Israel and Saudi Arabia, the categories used to extract evidence, and the procedure through which theoretical concepts such as balancing, threat perception, interest convergence, and coalition-building were identified in the material. Without such methodological transparency, readers cannot determine whether the empirical examples were systematically selected or chosen primarily because they support the proposed argument.

In the paragraph addressing sanctions, the manuscript states that “Sanctions therefore operate not only as instruments designed to change specific policies but also as mechanisms affecting the balance of capabilities.” This is an analytically

valuable proposition and should be developed more systematically. The authors could distinguish between the coercive function of sanctions, which seeks behavioral change, and their containment function, which seeks to restrict the resources available for military and regional activities. The manuscript should then connect this distinction directly to Israeli and Saudi interests. Doing so would make sanctions an identifiable mechanism within the proposed model rather than one item in a broad inventory of Iran–U.S. disputes.

The discussion of Saudi Arabia contains an important tension that should become a more explicit analytical finding. The article argues that Riyadh benefits from American deterrence against Iran but also notes that "Riyadh benefits from a regional environment in which the likelihood of direct war remains limited." This suggests that Saudi interests regarding Iran–U.S. hostility are nonlinear: Saudi Arabia may benefit from controlled pressure and balancing but suffer from uncontrolled military escalation. This is more theoretically interesting than simply stating that Riyadh benefits from continued confrontation. The revision should distinguish between limited strategic rivalry, coercive containment, crisis escalation, and open war, and clarify which level of Iran–U.S. confrontation is most consistent with Saudi interests.

A similar qualification should be introduced more explicitly for Israel. The sentence "continued American pressure on Iran can serve Israeli interests by constraining resources, reinforcing deterrence, and increasing the political and economic costs associated with Iranian military expansion" is plausible within the article's framework, but the manuscript should avoid assuming that greater Iran–U.S. confrontation always produces greater Israeli security. Escalation could also create retaliation risks, regional warfare, disruption of deterrence relationships, or attacks on Israeli territory. The authors should therefore distinguish between Israel's interest in sustained U.S. constraint on Iran and an alleged interest in unlimited escalation. Such differentiation would strengthen the analysis and prevent an overly deterministic interpretation of Israeli preferences.

The paragraph beginning "The importance of Saudi–Israeli convergence arises at precisely this intersection between persistent competition and selective flexibility" is central to the article but requires more direct empirical evidence of convergence. At present, the analysis derives convergence primarily from shared concerns about Iran. The authors should distinguish inferred parallel interests from demonstrable cooperation. Evidence of coordinated diplomacy, intelligence exchanges, shared security initiatives, common approaches to missile defense, parallel lobbying, or documented policy consultation would substantiate claims of coalition-building. Where direct evidence is unavailable, the wording should be moderated to "parallel balancing," "strategic compatibility," or "convergent preferences" rather than "coalition-building." This distinction is essential for avoiding causal overstatement.

The manuscript should reassess the causal weight assigned to the United States. The sentence "The United States functions as the principal external power through which much of this balancing is organized" is one of the article's strongest propositions, but the analytical implications are not fully developed. If Washington is the hub connecting Israeli and Saudi balancing strategies, the article should explain whether the relevant structure is best conceptualized as a triangular network, a hub-and-spokes security architecture, or a flexible regional balancing system. The authors should also identify the conditions under which U.S. preferences override those of regional partners. This would help prevent the article from inadvertently implying that regional partners determine American policy while simultaneously claiming that Washington possesses independent strategic interests.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the theoretical section, the paragraph beginning "Structural neorealism provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility because it shifts attention from the personal characteristics of leaders and the internal ideology of individual governments toward the constraints and incentives generated by the distribution of power in an anarchic international system" provides a useful foundation, but it conflates several strands of realist theory. The manuscript refers to structural neorealism, defensive realism, security dilemmas, threat perceptions, relative gains, coalition-building, and omnibalancing. These concepts do not all derive from an identical theoretical level or formulation. The authors should

distinguish Waltzian structural realism, which emphasizes systemic structure and distributions of capabilities, from approaches such as balance-of-threat theory and omnibalancing, which introduce additional explanatory variables. If these complementary concepts are retained, the article should explicitly explain how they are integrated rather than presenting all realist concepts as interchangeable components of a single theory.

The paragraph stating that "The concept of threat therefore mediates between power and coalition formation" raises an important theoretical issue that requires further clarification. Classical structural neorealism does not itself provide a fully developed account of how objective capabilities become subjectively interpreted as threats. If "threat perception" is an intervening variable in the proposed model, the authors should explain how it is inferred and what empirical indicators demonstrate its existence. For instance, official security doctrines, strategic documents, leaders' statements, defense planning, military procurement, or alliance behavior could be used as evidence. Without such operationalization, the manuscript risks treating threat perception as a post hoc explanation whenever balancing behavior is observed.

The theoretical discussion of balancing should more clearly differentiate "alliance," "coalition," "alignment," "strategic convergence," and "security partnership." The article currently states that "The distinction between alliance and interest alignment is therefore essential," which is correct, but the subsequent analysis continues to move among these terms without consistently defined boundaries. A formal alliance normally entails stronger institutionalized commitments than issue-specific convergence, whereas coalition-building may be temporary and purpose-specific. Because Saudi Arabia and Israel are central to the argument precisely despite the absence of a conventional bilateral alliance, terminological precision is particularly important. The authors should provide brief working definitions and then apply the same terminology consistently throughout the manuscript.

In the section "Iran–U.S. Hostility and the Regional Balance of Power," the opening paragraph summarizes the history of bilateral confrontation effectively but compresses several decades into a single narrative. The sentence "The relationship therefore developed a degree of path dependence: earlier conflicts shaped later expectations, and negative expectations increased the political and strategic costs of reciprocal trust" introduces the concept of path dependence without developing it theoretically. Either this concept should be removed to preserve theoretical coherence with neorealism, or the authors should explain its analytical role and relationship to structural incentives. Introducing additional conceptual frameworks without systematic integration may create theoretical eclecticism and weaken the article's parsimonious explanatory structure.

The paragraph beginning "From Tehran's perspective, the extensive U.S. military and security presence surrounding Iran creates a structural vulnerability" needs stronger evidentiary discipline. The passage attributes perceptions and strategic motivations to Iranian policymakers and subsequently interprets missile, drone, naval, and regional capabilities as compensatory deterrent instruments. Such propositions should be explicitly supported by evidence demonstrating how Iranian officials or strategic documents characterize these capabilities. More generally, the manuscript should distinguish carefully among observed capabilities, declared doctrines, inferred motives, and the perceptions attributed to adversaries. This distinction is particularly important in security studies because the argument rests heavily on the difference between what one state intends and what another state believes that state may intend.

The treatment of the nuclear issue requires greater analytical separation between nuclear capability, nuclear latency, weaponization, enrichment capacity, and perceived proliferation risk. The sentence "The nuclear issue intensified these dynamics because it linked technological capability to expectations concerning future strategic power" provides a useful starting point, but the subsequent discussion often refers broadly to "Iranian nuclear capabilities." The authors should use more precise terminology throughout and specify which dimension is considered relevant to Israeli, Saudi, and U.S. threat assessments. This precision is particularly necessary because structural-neorealist conclusions can differ substantially depending on whether the relevant variable is possession of nuclear weapons, latent capability, enrichment capacity, or uncertainty concerning future weaponization.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor's decision: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.