

Power Competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran: An Analysis

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to explore the craze of power competition in the Middle East. Today Middle East has become the hub of conflicts. Power competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has jeopardized the security dilemma for the whole region. There are many other factors of regional conflicts but the Shia-Sunni factor dominated not only media as well as policy analysts. This research is qualitative in nature. The results of the study found that regional conflicts gave birth to irregular armies that are fighting for their nation-state still on an old pattern. Wars and violence have also victimized the youth and children. In the case of Middle East politics, the Saudi-Iran rivalry has been contested hotly.*

Key Words: Saudi-Iran Relations, US Invasion, Saudi-Yemen War

Introduction

The security dilemma in the Middle East has created a threat to its neighbouring states. To understand the dynamics of Middle East conflicts it is necessary to examine some alternative frameworks that will help to understand the current regional politics. Today's power struggle is based on sectarianism including Shia, and Sunni contests in the Middle East. But for nuanced reasons, there are many other factors of regional conflicts but the Shia-Sunni factor dominated not only media as well as policy analysts. Looking at killing in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria anyone can easily guess the reason Sectarianism has been the major factor of regional conflicts and power politics in all these states. Media outlets of the region including television stations and newspapers in Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Jihadi website, and Al-Manar television of Hezbollah, all represent the struggle for sectarianism. So sectarianism is of crucial importance to understanding contemporary regional power politics.

However, these sectarian conflicts are new because the Shia-Sunni community lived in harmony for many years. Sectarian conflicts have not been seen in the Islamic history of the Middle East. Conflicts between Arabs were not sectarian but ideological. The civil war in Lebanon was sectarian in which Christians contested Muslims, but Shia and Sunni were on one side. The Iran-Iraq war 1980s was not sectarian but regional in which Arabs fought against the Persian nation while Syrian Arabs were with Iran. Arab-Israel wars were fought in the name of Islam, not sectarianism. The Shia-Sunni factor can be changed because it is not centuries long. The complex regional conflicts of the Middle East can be traced by understanding the regional players including state and non-state actors where Saudi Arabia and Iran played the key role. The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran left a horrible impact on the region that destabilized the region. Yet both states will not fight militarily. However, their contest

influenced the domestic political system of weak states of the region. Regional differences and the craze of power politics of Saudi Arabia piped the region into wars. Iran and Saudi Arabia relations were initially cordial when diplomatic ties first started in the early 1930s. However, a significant change in the dynamics was brought about by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which transformed Iran into an Islamic Republic with revolutionary ideals that opposed the already existing regional order. Iran and Saudi Arabia's confrontation was caused by a variety of factors, including geopolitics, religious differences, and economic concerns ([Gause, 2014](#)).

Saudi-Iran Power Competition in the Historical Perspectives

The present rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been about four decades. Despite all serious efforts, no one could solve their issues. The rivalry began with the Iranian revolution of 1979, while for some it is ancient since Arab-Persian antagonism; some argued rivalry began between the two states with the emergence of sectarianism (Shia, Sunni). Anyhow two major developments cannot be ignored in the contemporary conflict

- Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran and
- The American invasion of Iraq

However US intervention in Iraq upset regional security; consequently, filling the vacuum opened the door for both aggressive interventions of rival states. According to Charles Tripp and Shahram Chubin, there are many other factors of Saudi-Iran rivalry besides sectarianism:

- Geopolitical differences especially demographic and geographic have played an important role in decision making
- Each state in the Middle East has a desire to play a leading role in the Gulf region.

- Ethnic, cultural, and sectarian differences also exacerbated the power competition.

Additionally, the 1979 revolution led to a fundamental threat to the Gulf region, since the revolution, the Iranian government claimed to be an Islamic authority that directly threatened Saudi Arabia's interests. While being the guardian of Medina and Mecca Saudi Arabia has an integral place in the Muslim world. Both states have Ideological and geographical differences that feed into each other, and these differences exacerbated the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and Iran became a republic. In the 1930s both states met to have close ties because of the Hajj practice, where Persian goods were encouraged whether it was carpets or settlement of small-scale Persian communities. But after the Second World War Iran had cordial ties with the United States that Saudi Arabia couldn't compete with because of the minor population and military strength. Saudi Aramco was established in the early 1930s and proved to be a bridge between Saudi-US relations and help to enhance military ties between the two states. The two states were committed to fighting against Soviet communism, and Egypt's threat, and to maintaining the flow of oil. But relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia became worse after the British proclamation of departure from the Gulf region in 1968. Because of a new cold war, new competition began in the Middle East over regional leadership, Gulf security, and control of OPEC Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. ([Ervand, 1999](#)). Therefore America had expected to use Iran and Saudi Arabia against communism successfully. According to Keynoush, in comparison to Saudi Arabia, Iran's well-trained military and larger economy played a central role in this policy. Although Iran had been seen as the West's policeman in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia did not see Iran as an enemy, or an ally. Despite all efforts of Iran to attract Arab monarchs after the settlement of Bahrain issue all smaller

states resisted Iran's interference in the Gulf security pact. Saudi leadership was worried about friendly relations between Iran and the US. Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi had a personal relationship with President Nixon. The USA trusted in Shah that he would eventually reduce the foreign presence in the Gulf region. Tension was raised quite after the Iranian revolution, in Saudi Arabia when the Eastern Province Shia dominated performed an illegal ideological procession on the holiday Ashura, crowd carrying Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's pictures, anti-America, and anti-Saudi slogan were raised ([Khalifa, 2018](#)). The situation then became even tenser when Saudi authorities dispersed the crowd by using power. In 1979 when the USSR invaded Afghanistan, this was a valuable opportunity for Saudi Arabia to demonstrate its Islamic legitimacy in the world as well as in the region. For that purpose, the Saudi Government began to support travel and training troops. That raised tension between the two states. Iran-Iraq war 1980 also known as enforced war in Iran. The Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 to save the region from the effects of the Iran-Iraq war. GCC was established by six states Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. Even Saudi Arabia had aided Iraq with \$1 billion each month. On the eve of Hajj Iranian pilgrims protested against the Saudi government and 450 Irani pilgrims died in this protest. Iran protested against this incident and suggested that Iran should be the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. In turn, Riyadh decreased the number of Irani pilgrims from the next year ([Zarei & Zarrin, 2008](#)). The relations improved between the two states after Khomeini's death in 1989, during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi 1989-1997, and more cooperation by President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). In 1995 King Abdullah supported the Iranian president on the eve of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1997 in Pakistan. He assured him to remove US troops to contain Iran. Rafsanjani also promised to

ensure peace for Irani pilgrims during Hajj. Both leaders agreed to bring peace to the region, even Khatami was the first president who visited Riyadh officially in 1999 ([Gause, 2014](#)).

Saudi-Iran Relations in the 21st Century

A turn comes at the beginning of the 21st century after the 9/11 incident. To solve regional and global issues of terrorism, illegal immigration, money laundering, and drug trafficking, in 2001 and 2002, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement. Iran-Iraq War and Saudi tensions with Iran enhanced the US role in the region. The US played an important role in Saudi-Iran antagonism. Eventually, Iran was also determined to remove foreign pressure in the region, but Saudi Arabia created obstacles to achieve this goal. According to Saudi Arabia, Iran had created mistrust at the time of the revolution in 1979 with the aim of overthrowing the Saudi monarchy ([Iathol, Oazafi & Husain, 2017](#)). It is also crucial to know that Riyadh better understands an asymmetric difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia for a long, such as military strength, population, and industrial capacity. To some analysts, geopolitical competition increased after Iraq declined ([Pasha & others, 2021](#)).

For Riyadh, the resurgence of Shia power in Iraq in 2003 and the nuclear power of Tehran had upset the balance of power in the region. US inclination towards Iran also frightened Saudi leadership because of the Khomeini ideology against the monarchy system and belief in political authority. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was also following the same line. The US invasion of Iraq also disturbed the equilibrium of the Shia-Sunni state in the region. Ahmad Hassan Al Bark raised the Shia dominance in Iraq which was in liaison with coreligionists in Tehran. Additionally, Shia dominance in Iraq and Tehran could also be mobilized by the Shia community in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia ([Farzaneh, 2007](#)).

The Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 in Lebanon also bred sectarian tension. Hezbollah's support of Iran had been considered a threat to Shia-Sunni asymmetric in the region. The Arab leader's talk to their public is called the "Arab street" strategy. After the 2005 elections, Iran increased its activity in the Middle East under the leadership of Ahmadinejad. In 2006 Iran supported Hezbollah which increased rise Iran's popularity ([Golkar, 2015](#)).

Iran and Saudi Arabia's Relationship

The Saudi Arabia and Iran relationship can be divided into the following four phases since 2003.

Phase: 1:- US Invasion of Iraq and Saudi-Iran Befuddlement

The First phase began with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 which imbalanced the regional order. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Conflict had been exaggerated between Iran and Saudi Arabia due to the multiparty involvement of the region including the Iraqi Government, Bahrain, Houthi tribes of Yemen, Iraqi Shia, the Syrian regime, and Saudi Arabia's allies Gulf countries. The new stakeholders introduced new sets of interests whether it is primary, secondary, or invested. Gradually conflict moved from the leadership level to the top-down fashion of the two countries' populations which made it more complex ([Farzaneh, 2007](#)). Although Iran has more influence in Iraq than Saudi Arabia. For decades Iran had invested in opposition forces of Iraq. Anyhow leader of a powerful Shia Political Party, Ammar Al-Hakim.... Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq became more powerful in Iraq than in Iran, Ammar Al-Hakim refused to do the bidding of Iran, like the Sadrist movement. More grief for Iran is that Najaf attempted to be the centre of the Shia world. Iran doesn't want to see Iraq as an autonomous polity. Qassem Soleimani who was an expert in strategy made a blunder in pursuing this objective. Actually, it was

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri AL-Maliki, who was an Iranian ally, and his sectarian policies became the cause of the Islamic rise, and decline of Mosul ([Khalifa, 2018](#)).

Phase: II: - Proxy Wars and Syrian Conflict

The second phase consists of proxy wars, resulting from Arab Spring 2011. Iran invested in the Assad regime in Syria, while revolutionaries were supported by Saudi Arabia to control Iran's influence.

Saudi Arabia and Iran took the Syrian conflict as being weapon. However, there is not any role of the Syrian war in Saudi-Iran rivalry. Syria emerged as a central battleground to control the regional system instead of becoming an instrument of one hegemon state. Saudi Arabia seized this opportunity and strength itself in Syria and Lebanon and tried to change the post-2003 order. It even tried to weaken Iran and Syria, but there were also sharp divisions within the Sunnis, with Qatar supporting groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates funding opposition groups, which was diverted. The Saudis' goal in Syria was to provoke American intervention so they kept the Americans with them. For Iran, the 2011 coup was an existing threat to its ally Syria, instead of viewing Saudi Arabia as its main adversary, Iran used to focus on the United States and its ally Israel. Iran argued that the Gulf States were behind the regime change in Iran, government especially felt vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement and before the 2015 "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)" or "Iran nuclear deal" that would have imposed sanctions. Now the power competition in Syria is between Iran and Israel instead of Iran and Saudi Arabia. It depends on commitment; Iran has fully invested in the battlefield. Many Quds forces and Hezbollah personnel were killed during the war. Iran established many non-state actors to suppress Assad. Saudi Arabia felt that the US would not support more in Syria, so it would be better to leave Syria

without more loss. Assad again wants to come into power, and he is not happy with Iranian strength. Now Saudis are thinking of supporting Assad to counter Iran in Syria ([Al-Rasheed, 2016](#)).

Phase: III: - Saudi-Yemen Conflict

For more than one decade the Republic of Yemen has faced a number of armed conflicts, and multiple internal and external militant groups are part of armed conflict. Succinctly, armed conflicts fragmented the nation into different groups, and there is not any proper government structure in Yemen. The territorial dissolution of Yemen has been alarming for the international community and the United States. According to policymakers, the failure of the state can be of encouraging terrorist groups in the region. It can destabilize international shipping lanes near Bab el Mandeb which provide an opportunity for Iran to create a threat to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have had regional rivalries for almost more than four decades. Power competition between the two states creates security challenges in the whole region. The proxy war between the two states has continued in different regions of the Middle East including Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. Muhammad Bin Salman is frightened of the burgeoning Iranian strength to dominate the region. US antagonism with Iran encourages MBS to issue strong statements against Iran ([Nawaz & others, 2021](#)).

Iran's ally Houthi tribe in Yemen planned a coup against President Abed Rabbu Mansour Hadi with the help of former president Ali Saleh, who was backed by Saudi Arabia. On September 21, 2014, Houthi tribes overthrew the Hadi government and held power over state institutions. In 2015 Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm (ODS) against Iranian presence in Yemen, on the back of Houthi tribes.

MBS once said that there is no chance of understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran. MBS further said that the international community should enforce more sanctions on Iran because it is based on extremist ideology. Iran merely wants to control the Muslims in the Arab world. He said, "I will not wait until battle comes to Saudi Arabia, but we will work on that battlefield in Iran" ([Baban, 2017](#)).

Phase IV: Two-Party Confrontation

Tension escalated between the two states when Saudi Arabia executed a top Shia cleric Shiekh Nimr al-Nimr on January 2, 2016, convicted of terrorism. Saudi Arabia announced that it has executed 47 dissidents and militants, the news widely condemned. Nimra Al-Nimr was born in Saudi Arabia in a Shia family in 1959 and became the supreme leader of the Shia majority in Iran. Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei strongly condemned and said Saudi Arabia must face divine vengeance for the cleric's execution (Wilkin, 2017). The next day Iranian protestors attacked the Saudi consulate and Embassy in Iran and burned them. In response, Saudi Arabia and its allies (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) expelled Iranian ambassadors and downgraded diplomatic relations on the 4th of January. On January 7, 2016, Iran accused Saudi Arabia of bombing the Iranian embassy in Yemen. After two days, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia proclaimed that "additional measures are to be taken against Iran if it continues with its current policies" ([Al-Arabia News, 2021](#)).

Conclusion

Since the revolution in 1979, Iran has not only fighting for the interests of Shia Muslims but also for Muslims' interests against Israel and the USA. While also supporting Shia organizations including Assad's regime in Syria, Shia militia in Iraq as well and Hezbollah in Lebanon that fueled sectarianism in the entire region. The menace of sectarianism fueled more after the 2011 Arab Uprising. A series of protests began with the Tunisia Uprising

against the authoritarian regime of the region which soon spread across the region of the Middle East. However, it did not end as a result of democratic government while leeching the Arab world more authoritarianism and civil wars. The most destructive protest was in Syria in terms of loss of lives. Assad's regime in Syria responded to the popular demands for reforms with coercion and violence that triggered historical antipathy among Syrian Sunnis. The civil war in Syria swiftly became the battleground for the local rivalries of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh supported Sunni rebels while Tehran supported Assad's regime against the Sunni group of Syria. Riyadh condemned Tehran for advancing its agenda of sectarianism while in practice supporting Sunni rebels, who were fighting against an illegitimate regime that also advanced sectarianism in the region. The Civil War in Syria paved the way for the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). In fact, the dimension of sectarianism is more political than ideological. After the fall of Saddam's regime in Iraq, the process of sectarianism was further reinforced amid the Arab Spring which encouraged Saudi Arabia and Iran to expand their influence in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen. Saudi Arabia and Iran are both fighting proxy wars throughout the Middle East. Both have supported rebels and dissidents

with religious sectarian fatwas, planning advice, strategic guidance, intelligence equipment, training, financial assistance, and heavy weapons. Repercussions of their competition have not merely engulfed the Middle East but the whole Muslim World. For instance, it has spread vertically and horizontally and gave birth to the hyper-terrorist organization of Daesh, additionally a humanitarian crisis that increased the flow of migrants even towards European states. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen are caught in an unending crisis, and this situation will not be good for the Middle East as well as for the whole world.

Recommendations

Both states should promote regional cooperation and alliances that include both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Constructive regional organizations can help address common challenges, such as economic development, environmental issues, and counterterrorism efforts. There should develop and strengthen regional conflict resolution mechanisms that can help manage and de-escalate conflicts when they arise. The recommendation of the study is that both states should develop and strengthen regional conflict resolution mechanisms that can help manage and de-escalate conflicts when they arise.

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