NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY AND ITS REGIONAL EFFECTS

by

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December 2018

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE	*Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.

1. AGENCY USE ONLY *(Leave blank)*	2. REPORT DATE December 2018	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY AND ITS REGIONAL EFFECTS	5. FUNDING NUMBERS
6. AUTHOR(S) Atif Ejaz	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A	10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.	12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A

13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)

The Saudi–Iranian rivalry forms one of the most important components of the security dynamics of the Middle East. The rivalry has intensified with each country toiling to undermine the other. This dynamic directly affects the prevailing fragile security situation of the Middle East. Although their competition appears to be an ideological one, geo-political motives primarily drive this rivalry. Both countries use religion as an instrument to influence populations across the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have not directly confronted each other except to exchange hatred rhetoric. Both countries, however, are effectively utilizing the prevailing unrest and instability in adjoining countries and further complementing the instability by sponsoring proxy wars. Their unending quest for influence even at the cost of other countries' turmoil has devastating impacts for the region. It is imperative to understand the ways and methods both countries are using to enhance their influence and undermine the other in arena outside their own territory. Understanding the inherent motives of Saudi-Iranian rivalry and their methods of execution can assist the international comity of nations to play a more productive role in engaging both countries for peace in the region.

14. SUBJECT TERMS Saudi-Iranian rivalry	15. NUMBER OF PAGES 87
	16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
Unclassified	Unclassified	Unclassified	UU

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. 239-18

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THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY AND ITS REGIONAL EFFECTS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(COMBATING TERRORISM: POLICY AND STRATEGY)

from the

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

The Saudi–Iranian rivalry forms one of the most important components of the security dynamics of the Middle East. The rivalry has intensified with each country toiling to undermine the other. This dynamic directly affects the prevailing fragile security situation of the Middle East. Although their competition appears to be an ideological one, geo-political motives primarily drive this rivalry. Both countries use religion as an instrument to influence populations across the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have not directly confronted each other except to exchange hatred rhetoric. Both countries, however, are effectively utilizing the prevailing unrest and instability in adjoining countries and further complementing the instability by sponsoring proxy wars. Their unending quest for influence even at the cost of other countries' turmoil has devastating impacts for the region. It is imperative to understand the methods both countries are using to enhance their influence and undermine the other in the arena outside their own territory. Understanding the inherent motives of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and their methods of execution can assist the international comity of nations to play a more productive role in engaging both countries for peace in the region.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl al Haq
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
FLS	Front to Liberate Syria
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IR	International Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham
JAM	Jaish al Mahdi
NDF	National Defense Force
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OIC	Organization of Islamic Conference
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SCIRI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
SNC	Syrian National Council
SIL	Syrian Islamic Front

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have many people in line for my utmost appreciation, as without them I would not have been able to complete my thesis research. First, I want to thank the Pakistan Army for providing this great opportunity of advancing my studies in this prestigious institution. I am extremely grateful to Professor Afshon Ostovar, my thesis advisor, whose continuous and valuable guidance helped me to cruise through this arduous thesis research. He helped me to explore this intriguing topic in its totality by steering me through all of the avenues of research. Likewise, I am very thankful to Professor Christopher Darnton, my second reader, for helping me navigate the theoretical aspects of my thesis research. I thank my wife, Sahar, and my two beautiful daughters, Rahima and Ayesha, for their continuous help, perseverance, and untiring support throughout my thesis work. I want to give credit to my two brothers, Haris and Kashif, and my loving sister, Sharmeen, for always inspiring me to advance my studies and explore my quest for knowledge. I also want to thank Jasmine Mally from the Graduate Writing Center for her deliberate and tangible input throughout. I also would like to give my appreciation to Michele D'Ambrosio for her unwavering support toward the technical aspect of my thesis.

I hope this thesis finds its way to the policy makers throughout the world in support of better assimilation of this complex issue.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The security dynamics of the Middle East revolve around two main factors: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Though the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to arise from sectarian enmity between Sunnis and Shi'is, geo-political, economic, and ideological factors are the driving force. The two states continue to struggle to become the dominant power in the Middle East. To enhance its own influence and undermine the other, each country is aggressively supporting the proxy wars in other countries of the Middle East (i.e., Iraq, Yemen, Syria, etc.). This intensifying rivalry has had devastating effects on the Middle East, which has been shattered by war for the last two decades.

The ongoing turmoil in the Middle East since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 has created an environment of chaos and a security vacuum spreading from Iraq to Syria to Yemen. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to fill that vacuum with their influence and attain regional inspiration in the process. This power struggle between the two giants of the Middle East has deep implications for the peace and stability of the region. Regarding this turmoil and chaos Afshon Ostovar states, "As the rhetoric and proxy war escalates, neither side appreciates that they are destroying the region."[1] The instability in Iraq, the presence of Al Qaeda and ISIS in the region, and the ongoing Syrian crises have the potential to engulf the entire region in catastrophes. The behavior of both states has destructive consequences for the entire region.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have been embroiled in a quest for enhanced regional influential aspirations since the Iranian Revolution, with religion being used to justify their activity. The Arab Spring has intensified their competition for influence in Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria.[2] It is now generally recognized that Iran and Saudi Arabia are involved

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[1] "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1" *Frontline*, 1:56:41, posted by Martin Smith, February 20, 2018, http://www.pbs.org/video/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia-pqsnhk/.

[2] Simon Mabon, "Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: A Tangled Web of Politics and Terror," *CNN*, June 8, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/08/opinions/iran-saudi-arabia-terrorism/index.html.

in a "Cold War"-style struggle for dominance of the Middle East.[3] In this struggle for enhanced regional influence, both countries are spreading their influence aggressively in other countries and undermining the peace and stability of the region. To understand how both countries are shaping the regional environment, it is imperative to comprehend the behavior and methods each is employing to outplay the other.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The security dynamics of the Middle East have been increasingly shaped by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Their competition is outwardly ideological, but it has been driven primarily by political and economic motives. Religion has also been used by both states as a powerful tool to influence populations across the region. Under the prevailing environment, how are the two countries influencing the surrounding Muslim world in their pursuit of regional hegemony? This thesis will examine the methods and behavior that Iran and Saudi Arabia, through their competition with one another, have used to influence the region and to advance their political and strategic agendas.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH QUESTION

Saudi Arabia and Iran form the opposite poles in geo-politics of the Middle East. Their inter-state rivalry has affected the peace and stability of neighboring countries. Though multiple factors form the constituents of that rivalry, the regional political approach adopted by Iran's leadership after the 1979 revolution is at the root of antagonism in Saudi-Iranian relations. Arab monarchies felt directly threatened when Ayatollah Khomeini declared that Islam was fundamentally opposed to the notion of monarchy.[4] Likewise, Saudi politics are deeply intertwined with the Wahhabi form of Islam, which considers Shi'is as polytheists who venerate the family of the Prophet Mohammad and are therefore worthy of death. Both countries use their ideologies as a driving tool to attain geo-political objectives for their quest for regional influence.

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[3] Emma Ashford, "The Saudi-Iranian Cold War," *The International Security Studies Forum*, Policy Roundtable 2–4: February 20, 2018, 4, http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/2-4-saudi-iranian.

[4] Smith, "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has pitted against each other the self-proclaimed leaders of the two main sects in Islam: Twelver Shi'ism and Sunnism. While revolutionary Iran sought to export their Shi'i-centric form of theocracy beyond their borders, Saudi Arabia found itself, and the version of Sunnism (Wahhabism or Salafism) that its government champions, challenged. The Saudi royal family had proclaimed itself the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, but Iran began to openly challenge the validity of that claim after 1979.[5] Saudi Arabia views Iranian revolutionary politics as having a distinct objective to promote Shi'ism in a predominantly Sunni Muslim world, thereby posing an existential threat to the Saudi monarchy.[6]

The pre-revolution era witnessed cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially during the reign of King Faisal (1964–1975). This could be witnessed by Iran's active participation in the Mecca conferences, becoming a founding member of the league and help to establish the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), inaugurated by Faisal and the Shah in Morocco in 1969.[7] During this time, the increased cooperation between the two states could be witnessed by trade increasing threefold. On several occasions, both leaders showed their willingness to cooperate and avoid confrontation.

The Iranian Revolution started a new era of rivalry between the two states, however. Right from the onset, Iran's Islamic Republic opposed the Saudi Arabian monarchy.[8] Khomeini frequently called for the overthrow of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia while inciting the Muslim world that the custody of the holy cities (i.e., Mecca and Medina) should be under the collective custodianship of the whole Muslim Ummah instead of Saudi monarchs. Such attacks were seen as direct threats by Saudi Arabia whose monarchs viewed themselves as the legitimate protectors of the holy places of Islam.[9]

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[5] Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 21.

[6] Keynoush, 21.

[7] Keynoush, 85.

[8] Keynoush, 109.

[9] Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013), 53.

Moreover, Iran's ideological support to Shi'i of Eastern Saudi Arabia and in the surrounding countries especially Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq alarmed Saudi Arabia, which took such behavior as signs of Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the region.[10] Thus, the Iranian foreign policy objective of exporting the revolution placed Iran in conflict with Saudi Arabia. These conflicts have shown practical manifestations in the form of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), clashing interests in politically disturbed Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003, and Syria and Yemen after the Arab Spring (2011–present). The motive behind this enmity for both countries has been something more than ideology i.e., to attain assertive influence in the region.

The staunch stance of both countries over naming the gulf in the region—as Iran calls it the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia calls it the Arabian Gulf—demonstrates their symbolic version of animosity with each other. The clash on the naming of the Persian/ Arabian Gulf is a symbolic emblem of the animosity between both countries. The gulf is of strategic importance to both regional states, as it is the waterway for exporting huge amounts of oil. The economic dependency of both countries on oil and its unhindered export demands secure transit through the gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.[11] As a result, both countries show their possessiveness over the geo-strategically important location.

Within the geo-political sphere, economics plays an important role. The economy of both countries depends on natural resources, with oil being the primary source of income.[12] The countries are the two largest producers of oil. Saudi Arabia is the biggest shareholder in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), having one-third of its oil reserve. With this proposition, Iran finds it hard to achieve its economic goals. Due to different domestic requirements (Iran having a larger population than Saudi Arabia), the two countries want different oil prices to fulfill their financial requirements.

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[10] Mabon, 54.

[11] Mabon, 55.

[12] Mabon, 75.

The Iranians want the price of oil per barrel much higher than Saudi Arabia. This difference puts the two countries always at conflict in the economic domain.[13]

The recent easing of sanctions against Iran will help it to expand its petrochemical exports, thus making it competitive with Saudi Arabia in the emerging markets. As a result, Iran has started planning mega-projects in the petrochemical industry and is engaged with leading energy corporations for the upgrading of its petrochemical industry.[14] All these developments put Saudi Arabia in an insecure position and threaten its prevailing hegemony in the oil industry.

The Arab Spring—in which pro-democracy movements toppled established regimes—presented a number of challenges to the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as Saudi Arabia.[15] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran viewed this movement with the stakes in managing the outcome of the unrest and steered it for their own benefits.[16] Iran supported the protests in Bahrain for giving more autonomy to the majority Shi'i population but its eager support stumbled when the same movement sprouted in Syria.[17] Afshon Ostovar remarks, "As Iran hailed the will of people in Bahrain, it condemned the foreign plot that was causing the disorder in Syria."[18] Therefore, both countries reacted to the related events of the Arab Spring as per their benefits.

Both states are actively involved in engaging each other through proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, etc. The ethnic composition of Iraq with the adjoining reality of Saudi Arabia and Iran makes it prone to be an arena of proxies for both countries. Saudi Arabia opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as Saudi Arabia foresaw the increased

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13 Mabon, 75.

14 Tamer Badawi, *The Iranian-Saudi Petrochemicals Competition* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=64746.

15 Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 204.

16 Ostovar, 204.

17 Afshon Ostovar, *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy*: *When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide* (Washington, D.C: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288.

18 Ostovar, *Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy*.

Iranian influence in Iraq after Saddam Hussain fell, and especially after U.S. withdrawal. The Iranian influence within Iraq through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Qods Force is irrefutable.[19] Saudi Arabia's involvement in Iraq is still not openly disclosed; anecdotal evidence exists, however, regarding Saudi Arabia's financial support to the Sunnis of Iraq.[20] Likewise, in Syria, the shrinking core of the Alawite state, coupled with the desperate attempt to change the regime politically, urged Sunnis to revolt.[21] Iran, being an old ally of Syria, has been proactively supporting the Assad's regime against the rebellion of the Sunni majority populace. The complex scenarios of the Middle East have opened up multiple arenas for both countries to fight and enhance their influence, thereby destroying the peace of the region.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is no longer a surreptitious affair and much scholarly work has been done on its genesis/reasons. Over a period, the relationship between both states has evolved into a competition with the objective of increasing regional influence. Under these environments, it is very important to understand the ways and methodologies the two countries have adapted to undermine each other with the ultimate objective of attaining dominant regional influence. My thesis will focus on exploring those methods and behaviors, which both countries are using to attain their regional influence without considering its devastating effects on the region.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will provide a brief introduction/ identification of the rivalry between the two states, as well as its genesis and causes. It will establish a theoretical framework for describing and analyzing how the two states became rivals and influence the stability of the region through aggressively opposing each other's interests. It will analyze the role of trans-state identities in inter-state relations. Moreover, it will examine

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19 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 68–69.

20 Mabon, 68.

21 Roby C. Barrett, *The Gulf and The Struggle for Hegemony*, (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2016), 6.

how Saudi Arabia and Iran influence the surrounding Muslim countries primarily using ideology as their main tool but fulfilling their geo-political motives.

1. Identifying Rivals and Rivalries

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry can be categorized as an "interstate rivalry": a term employed to capture the two actors that are engaged in a form of an intense and conflictual relationship.[22] These types of relationships are more persistent and keep on surfacing in the international political world.[23] Understanding the evolved behavior of Saudi Arabia and Iran requires identifying why states become rivals. There have been certain explanations by different theorists in the field of international relations, attributing various factors for igniting rivalry.

As per William Thompson and David Dreyer, an interstate rivalry is an evolutionary process and conflicts between states are not independent but rather are part of a historical process in which a pair of states form and endure a relationship of unusual hostility. They further explain this phenomenon as, "What they do to each other is conditioned by what they have done to each other in the past as well as by the calculations about future ramifications of current choices."[24] Rivalries have a distinctive character trait of dealing with each other in a "psychologically charged context of path-dependent hostility."[25] Enduring rivalries are branded by a mutual expectation of hostility from each side, and this anticipatory attitude further supplements their antagonism.[26] "Perception pathologies make the conflict worse than they might otherwise have been."[27]

William Thompson and David Dreyer observe that interstate rivalry and conflicts occur due to overlapping of interests and goals. The gain of one state means a loss by the

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22 William R. Thompson and David Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries: 1494*–2010 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), 2.

23 Thompson and Dreyer, 2.

24 Thompson and Dreyer, 558.

25 Thompson and Dreyer, 558.

26 Christopher Darnton, *Rivalry and Alliance in Cold War Latin America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 3.

27 Thompson and Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries*, 559.

other one.[28] Christopher Darnton argues that rivalries tend to persist due to the parochial interests of the states rather than any mistrust between them.[29] Interstate rivalry may encompass interests related to territory, influence, status, and ideology.[30] Thompson and Dreyer observe, "Bennett defines interstate rivalries are dyadic situations in which states disagree over the issues for extended period of time to the extent that they engage in relatively frequent diplomatic or military challenges."[31]

2. Incongruence Dilemma

The incongruence dilemma encompasses the idea of identity incongruence, which forms the basis of tension between states, and between national and trans-state identities.[32] The incongruence dilemma explains Middle East politics, which involves the internal identity groups and the behavior of the states toward these groups.[33] The incongruence of the internal identity groups shapes up their behavior toward neighboring states. In order to understand the incongruence dilemma, it is imperative to understand the realist and constructivist's explanations of the behavior between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Realism explains the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is due to the anarchic nature of the Middle East region and is directed by security concerns. John Mearsheimer concludes, "Great powers are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals with hegemony as their final goal."[34] This status does not allow for a status quo between the states, and states seek to maximize their share of world power. Realists argue that the quest of power compels states to become rivals. Realists miss important aspects of identity and ideologies present within a state, however.[35]

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28 Thompson and Dreyer, 559.

29 Darnton, *Rivalry and Alliances in Cold War Latin America*, 3.

30 Thompson and Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries*, 559.

31 Thompson and Dreyer, 574.

32 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 8.

33 Mabon, 18.

34 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 29.

35 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 24.

Likewise, the constructivist rejects the notion of arm races being the dominant guiding factor and accords more weight to the norms of ruling elites of the Middle East, being the guiding factor for conflictual behavior.[36] Mark L. Haas states, "The core claim is that there exists a strong relationship between the ideological distance dividing states' leaders and their understanding of the level of threat they pose to one another's central domestic and international interests. The greater the ideological differences between the decision-makers of two states, the greater the ideological differences dividing decision makers across states, the higher the perceived level of threat."[37]

The incongruence dilemma is a modified form of the security dilemma in which both Iran and Saudi Arabia, concerned with the potential threats posed by each other due to the presence of trans-state identities, act to increase their security.[38] The loyalty of trans-state identities is more inclined toward the other country and becomes a security threat. Simon Mabon notes, "Hinnebusch urges that with the arbitrary boundaries emerging from the artificial imposition of states in the Middle East, loyalty to the state is tempered by the loyalty to sub-state and trans-state identities in Middle East."[39] This, in turn, affects the relations between identity groups and state and inter-state relations. The demographic profiles of both countries reveal the presence of like-identity groups in both countries (i.e., 15% Shi'i Muslims in Saudi Arabia and 10% Sunnis in Iran).[40] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran aspire to export their religious beliefs across the gulf and Middle East regions. Societies with limited political space (applicable to both countries) are prone to violence and the presence of trans-state identities in both countries (with marginal political space) can always be used to ignite the conflict.[41] This demographic incongruence along with limited political space complicates the relations between the two countries.

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36 Mabon, 20.

37 Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 4.

38 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 25.

39 Mabon, 19.

40 Mabon, 120–131.

41 Mabon, 108.

Mabon explains Joseph Nevo examining, "how the desired Saudi national identity falls under the jurisdiction of the House of Saud, which subscribes to a strict adherence of Wahhabi interpretation of Islam."[42] The House of Saud uses Wahhabism as a means of securing and increasing its legitimacy.[43] Moreover, Wahhabi doctrine brands Shi'i Muslims as heretics, which in turn, drives the rulers to be antagonistic against Iran.[44] The Iranian Revolution and its drive to inspire the other Muslim countries to follow them pose serious threats to the monarchs of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia sees Iran's end objective as an expansive, transnational, pro-Iranian Shi'i state with expansion incorporating Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, loyal to the supreme leader of Iran.[45]

Fred Halliday argues, "Conflict between Arabs and Persians is a product not so much of imperialist interferences or of millennial or atavistic historical antagonism but of the two interrelated modern processes of the state formation and the rise of nationalism."[46] The behavior of states, due to the process of state building and the necessity of deriving legitimacy, often result in leaders referring to myths and tales. These myths evoke nationalist sentiments and when coupled with Islamic rhetoric, complicate the regional relations.[47] Both countries have used ideology as well as mythical tales to induce the nationalist sentiments and complicate the affairs manifold.

Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite their ever-growing rivalry, have not directly confronted each other, but instead have challenged each other through proxies and rhetoric. Following the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf entered a 30-year period of conflict and instability, which continues to date.[48] The Iranian Revolution was immediately followed by Iraq's invasion of Iran, with Iraq's concern over Iran's incitement and the exporting of

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42 Mabon, 80.

43 Mabon, 138.

44 Mabon, 89.

45 Mabon, 3.

46 Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2000), 72.

47 Mabon, 79.

48 Barrett, *The Gulf and The Struggle for Hegemony*, 95.

revolution amongst the Shi'i of Iraq.[49] The Saudi's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war started to deny Iranian expansive designs once Iran entered Iraq.[50] Saudi Arabia's support to Iraq during the war has deeply augmented the newly born inter-state rivalry.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and removal of Saddam Hussein from the politics of Iraq forms another important event in the geo-politics of the Middle East. Iran became actively involved in the politically destabilized Iraq to enhance its influence in the country. Iran viewed this as an opportunity to increase its geo-political influence significantly in the region. Iran used the tool of proxy wars through client Shi'i factions in the country. To deny this opportunity to Iran, Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni faction in Iraq, thereby initiating a conundrum of struggle for gaining influence and denying it to the other.

Likewise, the Syrian conflict though heterogeneous in nature has turned into the battleground for Sunnis versus Shi'i with both countries actively involved in backing respective sides. When the uprising began in Syria, Iran became actively involved in providing assistance to Assad's regime both financially and militarily.[51] This has compelled Saudis to support the Sunni-dominated Syrian factions in their revolt against the Syrian ruler. The situation is more complex than a Sunni versus Shi'i conflict as Iran sees this as an opportunity to establish its strong corridor of influence extending through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This expansive design of Iran seriously undermines the Saudis' influence in the Arab region, thus, giving another dimension to their rivalry. It is imperative to explore the methods both countries are using to fight proxy wars in Syria. How are the two countries embroiled in an unending conundrum of fighting against each other's interests, with the motive of increasing their geo-political influence?

3. Conclusion

The preceding review explored the identification of rivalries with the aim of identifying the theoretical explanation of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The

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49 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran* 114.

50 Keynoush, 115.

51 "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 2" *Frontline*, 54:46:01, posted by Martin Smith, February 27 2018, http://www.pbs.org/video/bitter-rivals-iran-and-saudi-arabia-part-two-ka4dlm/.

thesis will mainly focus on how both countries are pursuing their rivalry? How are both countries entangled in indirect yet active pursuance through proxy wars in neighboring arenas? The rivalry is being engrained in the masses of both countries especially in Iran where public slogans of "Down with the House of Al Saud" can be heard frequently.[52] How is this affecting the regional stability and how have the other countries become the theatre of their rivalry? So far, both countries are following the policy of indirect confrontation. My thesis will explore how they are influencing the adjoining countries using different methods and causing major destabilization with the objective of gaining geo-political influence.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The thesis will seek to explain why the two countries are such antagonists with each other and what factors are shaping their behavior. It will also lead to a conclusive discussion of how both countries are enhancing their influence and with what objective. How is it affecting the peace of those countries and the overall region? What consequences will it have for the stability and peace of the region?

1. First Hypothesis

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is primarily driven by religious disputes and sectarian agendas by both states. Both the behavior and the policies of the two countries are primarily motivated by a desire to spread their brand of Islam beyond their borders.

2. Second Hypothesis

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is an interstate rivalry driven primarily by conflicting geo-political and economic factors. While both countries use ideology as a tool to spread their influence, ideology is just one of many tools used to advance their larger geo-political and economic aims.

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[52] Smith, "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

3. Third Hypothesis

The Iran-Saudi rivalry is not driven by an incongruence dilemma. Rather, in the process of state formation and rise of nationalism, leaders of both countries foster the perception of rivalry and use it as a political tool for unifying the populace.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will identify the theoretical explanation for the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and will borrow the themes of different schools of thought in the field of international relations (IR) to explore the reasons for both countries becoming rivals. It will focus on identifying the methods and behaviors both countries are using for influencing the adjoining Muslim countries in pursuit of attaining regional influence. The purpose of this study is to explore how both countries are influencing the other countries in the region and tarnishing the regional peace. What forms the reason/ ultimate objective for their continuous striving and what are the implications of this rivalry for the region?

Research for this thesis will include relevant source material including books, articles, journals, documentaries, and scholarly discourses about the various aspects of the thesis. Primary sources will include news reports from western and Middle Eastern media, foreign government websites, statements of the officials of both countries, religious and popular sources including social media, clerical lectures, and other relevant resources. Research will be limited to works in or translated into English and Arabic.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

The thesis will be composed of four chapters. The second chapter will contain a deliberate study of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and their behavior through an international relations (IR) perspective. The third chapter will focus on three case studies: the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), turmoil in Iraq after 2003, and crises in Syria (2011–present); it will also address both countries' use of the existing instability as a means to increase their influence. How are the two countries deeply involved in supporting their clients and how has this complicated the overall situation? What methods are both countries employing to influence

their respective factions? The final chapter will conclude with a discussion of these findings about the ongoing rivalry between both countries and its ultimate effects on the region.

II. SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

> The grandeur of history lies in the perpetual conflict of nations, and it is simply foolish to desire the suppression of their rivalry.
>
> —Heinrich von Treitschke[53]

One of the important components of the geo-politics of the Middle East is the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The rivalry between the two countries has been transformed over a period of time to the extent of affecting regional stability. The two countries have shown their capability of displaying a wide array of enmity ranging from public rhetoric to actively yet indirectly confronting each other. In order to understand the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is imperative to first understand why regional states become rivals. This chapter will attempt to posit why rivalries between states arise and persist, with particular focus on the Saudi-Iranian case, through the perspective of IR theory.

As the field of IR deals with the interpretation of the behavior of states, this chapter will primarily focus on why states become rivals and why rivalries persist.[54] The hostile relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be termed as rivalry or even bitter rivalry at present.[55] This chapter will initially analyze the reasons for the origin of inter-state rivalries by evaluating them with specific relevance to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The latter part of the chapter will focus on IR theoretical explanations of the inter-state behavior as rivals and relate those behaviors to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

A. WHY RIVALRIES BEGIN

How and why do the relations between states sometimes transform into rivalries? Political scientists have advanced many arguments that seek to explain inter-state rivalry.

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53 Jacob L. Talmon, *Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 106.

54 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 8.

55 Smith, "Bitter Rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

The most common explanation focuses on entrenched geo-political and economic interests, where each state guards its interests while acting to prevent another state from pursuing their interests. The behavior of the states with each other may have deeply embedded historical enmity that transfers from generation to generation.[56]

The behavior of the state is also governed by the anticipated actions of a hostile state.[57] Perceived hostile acts can compel states to indulge in reciprocal hostile actions, a cycle, that can lead to a rivalry. Another reason for inter-state rivalry is the parochial interests of the actors within the state whose interests are in continuation of the rivalry.[58] In certain cases, the rivalry can have a combination of root-causes, thus, making the rivalry a very complex issue. While elucidating upon all theoretical motives of rivalry in the ensuing paragraphs, I will argue that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is mainly driven by geo-political factors with the ultimate objective of gaining regional hegemony with other factors complementing their drive. This regional hegemony is, however, more in terms of enhanced regional influence rather the motive of the conquest of the adversary.

Rivalries revolve around the conflicts due to overlapping geo-political interests between two states. The overlapping of interests is mostly due to scarcity of resources, which states aim to address by enhancing their geo-political influence. In this environment, someone's gain means a loss for the other.[59] Thus, both the states get involved in a vicious cycle of achieving their geo-political goals with aggressive denial responses from the other. This, in turn, transforms the normal relations into enmity and further evolves to rivalry.[60]

In the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the geo-political factors of the Middle East play a vital role in shaping up the rival approach of both states toward each other. The Middle East has been the region subjected to myriad turbulence since the mid-20th century. The turbulence has lessened the role of many countries like Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan

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56 Thompson and Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries*, 557.

57 Darnton, *Rivalry and Alliances in Cold War Latin America*, 3.

58 Darnton, 2.

59 Thompson and Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries*, 559.

60 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 41.

in the region while Iran and Saudi Arabia have evolved as the major players. In the prevailing turmoil of the region, both countries are toiling hard to achieve their geo-political objectives (i.e., enhanced influence in the region).[61] In the economic domain, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the major oil-producing countries and have huge stakes in the energy sector. The interest of both countries clashes in the forum of OPEC and further augments the rivalry.[62] Moreover, the ultimate aim of their aggressive pursuance for geo-political and economic motives is to attain regional influence.

The dyad theory advanced by William Thompson explains the inter-state behavior striving for geo-political and economic interests and that "conflicts are about real incompatibilities in attaining material and nonmaterial goals."[63] Moreover, as per Thompson, "When the dyad encompasses the states with roughly equal capabilities, the conflicts of interest are likely to persist because it is less likely that one part of the dyad will be able to impose its will on the other actor successfully."[64] The Saudi-Iranian case can be categorized as a dyad where both countries have roughly the same capabilities and can equally thwart each other. But no side has absolute dominance of the other. Therefore, neither side is ready to compromise and behaves in a manner that complicates the relations. As a result, the rivalry between the two states persists.

Persistent historical enmity between nations can also lead to a rivalry. William Thompson explains interstate rivalry in this way: "Conflicts are not independent rather part of the historical process in which a pair of states create and sustain a relationship of atypical hostility for some period of time."[65] After the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabs expanded and defeated the two great empires: the Byzantines in the West and the Sassanians in the East, an empire encompassing modern-day Iran, Iraq, and parts of Central

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61 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 8.

62 Badawi, *The Iranian-Saudi Petrochemical Competition.*

63 Thompson and Dreyer, *Handbook of International Rivalries*, 559.

64 Thompson and Dreyer, 60.

65 Thompson and Dreyer, 558.

Asia.[66] One of the possible arguments in the rivalry can be historical enmity where Persians view Arabs as former invaders.

Although enmity might have existed on such bases at times in the past, there also have been eras where the two countries had been enjoying very friendly and cooperative relations especially during the time of Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia.[67] Moreover, the present-day rivalry has its roots more deeply engrained in the events related to the 1979 Iranian Revolution as well as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Therefore, the present-day rivalry seems to have much less to do with historical enmity than with political disputes arising from the more recent past.

Rivalries may evolve due to hostile perception of the states toward each other. As Christopher Darnton states, "Rivalries are enduring, conflictual relationships between states. They are characterized by mutual anticipation of hostility which is reinforced as both sides act on these expectations, but not by constant or unrestrained violence."[68] The hostile anticipations of each other's actions generate a series of unending anticipatory actions by both sides. It is very likely that Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the domain of the perception pathology, have been involved in such a pattern of behavior. Moreover, the role of religious clergy in promoting the hostile perception in both countries cannot be negated.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are the primary representatives of two opposing versions of Islam: Shi'ism and Sunnism. Both states have a strong influence on the contemporary religious views and ideologies arising from their respective sects, which helps shape their internal politics and the regional political arena. Religious clerics form an important component in the policy issues of both states and generate the hostile perceptions regarding each other in public as well as in the rulers' mindsets.[69] Belonging to opposing sects, both countries perceive each other's actions as a way to spread their ideology. This perception

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66 Faisal Al Yafai, "Hostility between Iranians and Arabs Betrays History," *The National*, August 6, 2013, https://www.thenational.ae/hostility-between-iranians-and-arabs-betrays-history-1.334134.

67 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 85

68 Darnton, *Rivalry and Alliances in Cold War Latin America*, 3.

69 Smith, "Bitter Rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

leads to a stern and aggressive response from both sides, leaving very little room for mutual cooperation. Perceptions fall in the psychological domain and therefore do not have concrete evidential support. Although this theory cannot describe the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as wholesome, it cannot be totally disregarded but seen as an attributing factor.

Another proposed explanation of persistent interstate rivalry is the parochial interest of domestic actors. As Darnton states, "rivalries frequently persist because of parochial interest within states."[70] The envisaged parochial interest of the religious clergy of both states is to keep the rivalry alive. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have dominant religious clerics with dominance in national affairs. Since there have been eras of mutual cooperation and trust between the two states, it relegates the role of the religious factor as driving force of rivalry.

The religious factor gets indirectly involved, however, as it can be the parochial interest of religious clout of both states to keep the rivalry on. The religious-based public rhetoric of both states against each other provides the evidential support of this proposition.[71] Recently Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti (top cleric), Abdulaziz al-Sheikh stated about Iranians, "We must understand these are not Muslims, they are children of Magi and their hostility toward Muslims is an old one, especially with the people of Sunna."[72] The statement of the Grand Mufti was in response to Ayatollah Ali Khameini urging the Muslim world to challenge the Saudi's right to maintain the two holiest Islamic sites (i.e., Mecca and Medina).[73]

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had always been expressing openly hate-filled rhetoric against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As per Banafsheh Keynoush, "from its inception in the spring of 1979 following a national referendum, Iran's Islamic republic was the antithesis to the Saudi monarchy. Khomeini called for the overthrow of Saudi

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70 Darnton, *Rivalry and Alliances in Cold War Latin America*, 2.

71 Darnton, 2.

72 "Iranians Are 'Not Muslims', Says Top Saudi Cleric," *The Express Tribune,* September 12, 2018, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1177161/iranians-not-muslims-says-top-saudi-cleric/.

73 "Iranians are 'Not Muslims', says Top Saudi Cleric."

monarchy, and argued that Muslims should unite as one nation (ummah) to administer the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah."[74] Moreover, uttering hate speech against each other's ideology by the firebrand religious clerics in routine Friday prayers is a common phenomenon in both countries.[75]Although the parochial interest of religious clerics to keep the rivalry alive can be an attributing factor, it cannot be the single driving force behind this rivalry.

B. PREVAILING SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY THROUGH REALIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST'S LENS

As per Simon Mabon, "heterogeneous theories of IR suggest that the behavior of a state is determined by various aspects ranging from the security concerns to state institutions, from identity to the construction of the international system."[76] The field of IR revolves around two distinct schools of thought explaining the behavior of states: realism and constructivism. Realism as a school of thought is predominantly focused on power.[77] I will analyze the Saudi-Iranian rivalry through different theories of IR and argue that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry cannot be explained in whole either by realism or by constructivism. Although, realism explains the major portion of rivalry including the quest for power, there are contributory factors that can be explained only by constructivism.

1. Realism

Realism explains that an international system is driven by the quest for power where states are the unitary actors. As per Mearsheimer, the great powers are always searching for opportunities to achieve power over their rivals and their ultimate goal is to become the hegemon.[78] This conundrum of power struggles makes the status quo of states to be a continuous struggle to achieve hegemony. As per Mearsheimer, "hegemony means

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74 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 109.

75"Iranians Are 'Not Muslims' Says Top Saudi cleric."

76 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 8.

77 Mabon, 10.

78 Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 29.

domination of the system."[79] Regional hegemony is the domination by the states within the region. The regional hegemon controls and influences the region as per its own interests. Moreover, the regional hegemon does not allow others to relegate its status and likewise does not want peers.[80]

As per Mearsheimer, the international system is anarchic in nature.[81] The Middle East has been the epicenter of world crises, chronically war-prone and site of the world's most protracted conflicts.[82] The region apparently translates the realists' anarchic region characterized by security competition and war. The region has been subjected to war during the last four decades with Saudi Arabia and Iran arising as major stakeholders in the region. Realists' anarchy and the struggle for power in prevailing circumstances explain the behavior of both countries to enhance their influence in the region and attain regional hegemony (i.e., dominating influence in the region).

Another supposition is great powers have inherently offensive military capability and thus are potentially dangerous to each other. Linked to the previous supposition, this assumption says states are never certain about other states' intentions as to whether they will use their military force against each other or not. Based on these assumptions, great powers are compelled to behave in an anarchic manner.[83] This proposition is also based on the realism world, where states, having the potentials to harm each other, behave as foes.

Considering Saudi Arabia and Iran as the great powers of the Middle East, the behavior of both states can be translated into aforementioned assumptions. Both countries have relevant military capability designed to thwart each other's territorial integrity. Likewise, the uncertainty about each other's intentions, with potent military capability in hand, tends to engage them in a power struggle. The hostile perceptions of each other

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79 Mearsheimer, 40.

80 Mearsheimer, 41.

81 Mearsheimer, 30.

82 Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

83 Hinnebusch, 30–31.

further supplement the uncertainty factor, which compel both the states to engage in a vicious cycle of rivalry.

As per Mearsheimer, the great powers fear and regard each other with suspicion and insecurities. They perceive, whether rightly or wrongly, each other as a danger and little room exists for mutual trust amongst states. Mearsheimer further explains that great powers consider the other great power in the region as an enemy.[84] Moreover, it is the desire to survive that inspires the states to behave aggressively. Likewise, states seek for their own survival and visualize other states as potential threats. Since the realists' international system has no central authority to guarantee the security of any state, each state sees itself as vulnerable and aims for its guaranteed security. Thus, states aggressively guard their own interests without any compromise. This leads to the states entering into an unending power struggle.[85]

Another explanation of states with security-threatening behavior toward each other has been advanced by F. Gregory Gause. He describes the phenomenon of regional security complex, where states feel mutually threatened by each other.[86] According to this approach, such a regional system is characterized by mutual fear/threats from each other. He has termed the Persian Gulf a regional security complex. Gause further delineates that, "Such regional systems should include states whose primary security focus is one another, manifested over time in the wars they fight and time and resources they devote to dealing with one another. Note that this conception of a regional system does not privilege positive interactions such as efforts at regional integration."[87] Such a system is defined by its intensity and longevity of security relations. The Persian Gulf especially in the prevailing era has emerged as a regional security complex, wherein Iran and Saudi Arabia have emerged as major players. Both countries regard each other as a security threat and resultantly, behave in a way that has been detrimental to the regional peace.

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84 Hinnebusch, 32.

85 Hinnebusch, 29–30.

86 F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of The Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

87 Gause, 4.

Realism has further been refined into different categories, including classical realism, neo-realism, and neo-classical realism. According to neo-realism, the international system is governed by the security concerns and states again are the main factors.[88] States are always seeking the ways and means to enhance their security. The international system is characterized by self-help systems where states are in the quest of enhancing their security.[89] The neo-realism explanation revolves around the states as unitary actors. According to Kenneth Waltz, security is preserved through a balance of power in which states counter the threats with the aim of ensuring equality in the interstate relation.[90] With regard to Saudi Arabia and Iran, the nature of rivalry is more complex; the security concern of both states has definitely been a major contributory factor but not the single factor defining their rivalry. Geo-political interests, the presence of trans-state identities, ideological differences and economic factors are other major actors.

Neo-classical realism combines the classical and neo-realism with focus on the balance of power. Neo-classical realism as introduced by Gideon Rose, states that the scope of a country's foreign policy is determined by its relative material power and still revolves around realists' balance of power.[91] Neo-classical realism further adds that states' distrust and failure to identify each other accurately can result in an under-expansion or under-balancing behavior leading to imbalances between the states within the international system.[92]As per Steven E. Lobell, "Neo-classical realism argues that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the country's relative material power. Yet it contends that the impact of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressure must be translated through intervening unit-level variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and state structure."[93] This explanation of neo-classical realism explains the role of strong domestic factors in Saudi

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88 Kenneth Waltz, *The Theory of International Politics* (Illinois: Wavelength Press Inc, 1979), 126.

89 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 12.

90 Mabon, 12.

91 Mabon, 13.

92 Mabon, 13.

93 Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5.

Arabia and Iran for their anti-behavior toward each other. Religious clergy on both sides and institutions like the IRGC in Iran have profound effects in shaping the Saudi-Iranian relations.

Is it the ambition for geo-political interests and the quest for becoming regional hegemons that make Saudi Arabia and Iran rivals? Or is it the matter of survival for both countries that compels them to behave like rivals with each other? Is the absence of any central authority, possession of strong military capabilities by both states or the uncertainty and insecurity with each other that compels them to be rivals? Realism offers a great deal of explanation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but there are still some important and unexplored factors that are vital in their context. Realists primarily focus on power where the state acts a unitary actor. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has other important factors, however, including the role of ideology, trans-state identities, etc. Ideology has been a much-debated factor in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Both countries have religious-centric power hubs spreading hatred against the other's ideology and declaring each other as apostates.[94] Likewise, another important factor in the rivalry is the presence of trans-state identities in both states which leads to the incongruence dilemma.[95]

The politics of the Middle East cannot be comprehended without analyzing the role of ideas and in particular political ideologies.[96] As per Fred Halliday, "one cannot explain any society, political system and international relationship without societal values and ideologies."[97] Constructivists explain the role of norms and identities in the inter-state behavior more deliberately. Constructivists emphasize more on non-material factors such as identities/ ideologies and explain the role of norms and ideas in a more deliberate manner.[98]

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94 Ishaan Tharoor, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Accuse Each Other of Not Really being Muslim," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/07/saudi-arabi-and-iran-accuse-each-other-of-not-really-being-muslim/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b9f5716d5de8.

95 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 24.

96 Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in the International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31.

97 Halliday, 32.

98 Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 14.

2. Constructivism

Constructivism explains state behavior in international politics as based on cultures due to identities, norms, and experiences. The political scientists do not accept the powerful and independent impact of ideas and do not grade them as primary or independent variables, however. More recently, however, the importance of cultural differences impacting the interstate relations has gained more attention of IR theorists.[99] The cultural differences can lead to incongruity in the interstate relations and can form an underlying reason for rivalry.

Constructivists emphasize that the objective facts cannot be explained in isolation but are dependent on socially embedded norms. This explanation discards the material analysis of realists with more significance to norms and social factors.[100] Another clarification of importance of norms in the Middle East politics comes from Michael N. Barnet's work which disagrees with the realism notion of security as the main factor in international politics. Rather, Barnet argues that "the self-image of the leaders determines actions, holding that ruling elites of the Middle Eastern states are more concerned with perceptions, particularly the perceptions of impropriety, and thus holds symbolic politics over military politics."[101] Likewise, Barnet argues that, "Arab nationalism has a powerful hold over Arab states."[102] This strong Arab nationalist sentiment sees Iran as non-Arab and thus attracts enmity. This argument is associated with norms and shows how these norms express the identity and control the relations.

While considering these explanations in the realm of Saudi Arabia and Iran, it seems to explain the relationship between the apparent concept of security-driven enmity and norms of the ruling elites of both states. Moreover, it is also imperative to understand that the states conforming to a certain identity conform to the norms associated with that

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99 Halliday, *The Middle East in the International Relations*, 31.

100 Halliday, 14.

101 Halliday, 20.

102 Michael Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 413.

identity. In the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, norms are driven by the identity of being Arab or Persian as well as by religious identity (i.e., Sunni versus Shi'i). Both Saudi Arabia and Iran represent the opposing staunch sects of Islam—Iran being the custodian of Shi'i Islam and Saudi Arabia representing the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, the governing organizations of both countries have influential religious clout swaying the foreign policies. Combining the effect of the identities and norms has a profound impact on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

It does not imply, however, that these norms (i.e., Arab/Persian identity or religion/ideology) are the main driving factor of Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Both countries have enjoyed periods of friendly relationships especially in the reign of King Faisal and the Shah of Iran.[103] Moreover, the rivalry is the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini's rhetoric of calling the Al-Saud illegitimate custodians of Mecca and Medina.[104] Therefore, it leads to an argument that the ruling elites of both countries are engaged in promoting enmity by using ideology. This enmity is for the ultimate objective of becoming the regional hegemon.[105]

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103 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 10.

104 Smith, "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

105 Smith.

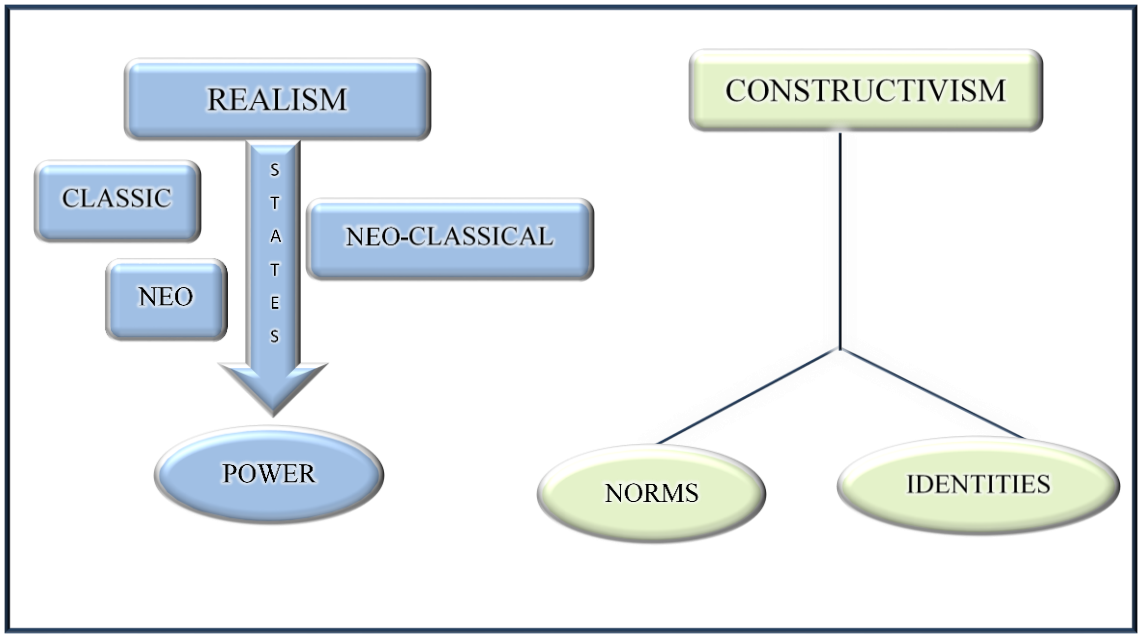

Figure 1. Visual Comparison of Realism and Constructivism.

3. Incongruence Dilemma

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has another important factor: the presence of trans-state identities in both countries. Realist theories have their main focus on power where states act as unitary actors but misses out on the role played by identity groups. As per Simon Mabon, one of the powerful explanations of the Middle East politics is derived from what he termed the incongruence dilemma, tensions between the states and national identities, and between sub-and trans-state identities.

The incongruence dilemma due to trans-state identities has pronounced effects in the Middle East. As Hinnebusch argues, "with arbitrary boundaries emerging from the artificial imposition of states in the Middle East, loyalty to state is tempered by loyalty to sub-state and trans-state identities."[106] This not only affects the relations between the state and the identity group but also antagonizes the interstate relations. As per Simon Mabon, "the incongruence dilemma can lead to an internal security dilemma, where identity groups

[106] Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 19.

challenge the territorial integrity and ideological sovereignty of the regime."[107] Mabon states Barry Posen explaining, "security dilemmas affect the relations between identity groups as well as between states."[108] An internal security dilemma threatens the ruling elites of the state from an identity group with territorial or ideological sovereignty challenges.[109]

The presence of 15% Shi'i Muslims in Saudi Arabia and likewise 10% Sunnis in Iran forms the trans-state identities creating an incongruence dilemma that contributes to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Both the identity groups in the respective countries have been socially and politically marginalized by the dominant faction. In Iran, reportedly hundreds of Sunnis are imprisoned. Sunnis do not enjoy religious freedom. Reportedly, there is no Sunni mosque in Tehran with a Sunni population of 1 million. Moreover, Sunni literature and teachings are banned in public schools, and new construction of Sunni mosques and schools is also prohibited.[110] Likewise is the plight of Shi'is in Saudi Arabia. They are the neglected and deprived community despite belonging to the largest-oil producing region in Saudi Arabia. The execution of Shi'i cleric Nimr al Nimr in 2016 raised enormous rage in the Shi'i community, especially in Iran.[111] Consequently, the presence of the incongruent identities in both states, transcends the inherent animosity against each other, compelling the IR theorists to take into consideration the trans-state identity factor, outside the realists' world.

The presence of trans-state identities in Saudi Arabia and Iran has originated the same kind of internal security dilemma where the ruling elites consider these identities as threats to their ideological and territorial sovereignty. Both states imply the presence of these trans-state identities in their countries as ideological as well as territorial threats. The oppressive behavior of the rulers of both states toward these identities explains the presence

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[107] Mabon, 26.

[108] Mabon, 26.

[109] Mabon, 26.

[110] David A. Graham, "Iran's Beleaguered Sunnis," *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/iran-sunnis-saudi/422877/.

[111] Thom Poole, "Iran and Saudi Arabia's Great Rivalry Explained," *BBC News*, January 4, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35221569.

of a security dilemma. This compels the identity groups to seek empathy as well as moral support from the other state. The response from the other state (though even confined to rhetoric), in turn, causes an external security dilemma and the state can be termed as facing an internal-external security dilemma.[112]

C. CONCLUSION

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has evolved over a period of time into a very complex problem. Although the enmity between the two states has historical background, this cannot be seen as the sole reason for their rivalry. The realist theory about the quest for power, with states being the unitary actors, defines most of the aspects of the rivalry between the two nations. After deliberating upon the behavior of the two states with each other in different eras, it can be deduced that both countries are toiling for geo-political and economic gains. Both states are aspiring for greater regional influence—a notion that can be elucidated through realist explanations.

The prevailing chaos in the Middle East, especially in the regions of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, with a fragile situation in Bahrain and other countries, has led to active involvement by both states to enhance their influence in the region. Both countries are desperately trying to gain their hold in the region. This quest for enhanced regional influence is the true narration of the realists explanation of states' behavior. There are some major contributing factors that form major constituents of the behavior of both states, however, and which cannot be explained within the realist domain.

The rivalry has been compounded with complexities due to multiple contributory factors. The hostile perceptions against each other have been a major contributory factor. Actions of both countries have been the result of hostile perceptions and that has involved them into a conundrum of antagonistic engagements. Another contributory factor in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is use of ideology as a driver to their main objective. Both states have been using ideology as the main driving tool to legitimize their enmity. Both states have strong religious clout influencing the states' foreign affairs. This religious clout provides

[112] Poole.

the driving force to the animosity between both countries and repulses any reconciliation between them.

Likewise, the presence of trans-state identities in both states keeps their rulers in an insecure mindset and drives them to take suppressive actions, thus drawing the hostile response from the other state. Thus, the presence of trans-state identities forms another contributory factor in the rivalry. The phenomenon of trans-state factors cannot be explained in the realist world as it interprets state as unitary actor. All these factors involve norms and identities, which can be explained by constructivists.

To conclude, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a complex issue, which cannot be explained by considering realism or constructivism in isolation. Realists' explanations covers major portions of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. There are contributory factors in shaping the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, however. The geo-political and economic motives with the ultimate objective to achieve regional influence, undoubtedly, constitutes a major reason for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, and there are additional undeniable contributory factors adding fuel to fire. These factors can best be explained through the prism of constructivism.

III. CASE STUDIES: MANIFESTING SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry forms one of the main constituents of the security dynamics of the Middle East. In many ways, the 1979 Iranian Revolution can be seen has having triggered the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Since establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the revolution, both states have actively engaged in enhancing their influence and undermining the other in arenas outside their borders. This chapter will examine the Saudi-Iranian rivalry through three case studies: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the turmoil in Iraq after the U.S. invasion (2003) and the Syrian civil war (2011 to present). Through evaluating these cases, evidential support for how Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaging each other on the turf of other countries shows how their competition is aiming toward enhancing their regional influence. These cases further show how Iran and Saudi Arabia, through their ongoing competition, have become major contributors of instability in the region.

The Iranian Revolution had pronounced effects on the genesis of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. On the revolutionary arrival of Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979, Saudi Arabia's King Khalid sent his congratulation uttering satisfaction on the formulation of an Islamic republic in Iran. As per Henner Furtig, Prince Abdullah further stated, "from now on Islam will be the basis of our common interests and relations."[113] Ayatollah Khomeini disregarded the gesture, however, and declared the monarchs of Arab countries were illegitimate.[114] Iranian leadership added to that anti-Saudi stance by directly criticizing the Saudi monarchy, their oppressive policies, and questioning the legitimacy the House of Al-Saud as the custodian of Islam's holy sites at Mecca and Medina.[115] This laid the foundation for the ever-increasing rivalry, and both countries since then have been actively engaged in contesting each other and in turn undermining the security of the region.

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113 Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2002), 26.

114 Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 10.

115 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 27.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), relegation of Iraq in the politics of the Middle East after the U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003–2010), and the conflicts that followed after the Arab Spring especially in Syria, form important events in shaping the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Immediately after the revolution, Iran and Iraq got involved in a war that remains the Middle East's longest interstate conflict: the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88).[116] Saudi Arabia feared that victory for Iran would be a powerful supplement to its expansive ambitions of exporting revolution. To counter this threat, Saudi Arabia provided robust political and financial support to Iraq, annoying Iran and amplifying the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) relegated the political power of Iraq to the margins in the Middle East, and thus upgraded Saudi Arabia and Iran as the major powers in the region. Moreover, the sprouting of the Arab Spring in the region resulted in wars in several countries including Syria. The overall anarchy created security vacuums in Iraq and Syria, which both Iran and Saudi Arabia have exploited to expand their influence and regional power.[117] Before dwelling upon the case studies, I will delineate how the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) sowed the seeds of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region with devastating effects toward the peace of the region in the times to come.

A. ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN (1979) – SOWING SEEDS OF RIVALRY

The Islamic Revolution in Iran had a profound negative impact on Iran's relations with the Arab world in general and with Saudi Arabia in particular. As per Vali Nasr, author of *The Shi'i Revival*, "before 1979, Islam as a political phenomenon was a marginal idea in the region. The Arab world was all about socialism and Arab nationalism and Iran was dominated by secular forces. Now once Khomeini takes over, Islam is squarely put onto the table in the Middle East."[118] The successful overthrow of a powerful king in Iran and government takeover by the revolutionaries took Ayatollah Khomeini and his anti-monarchical Islamism to the next level. Khomeini aimed his revolutionary messages to

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116 Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 1991), 1.

117 Smith, "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

118 Smith.

encourage the oppressed public of Arab countries to rise up against their corrupt rulers.[119] As per Henner Furtig, "More significantly, Iranian leaders and clerics directly and indirectly called on their brother Moslems on the other side of the Gulf to follow the example set by revolutionary Iran."[120] Khomeini had often called the monarchs of the Arab world as a tool to the United States for guarding its interests.[121]

Khomeini emerged with the concept of exporting revolution by inciting the general masses of Arab monarchies and posed an existential threat to the rulers. Khomeini urged his clerics to use the gatherings of Hajj in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as a perfect podium to spread the theme of revolution. In 1979, Khomeini gave the following directives to the Iranian pilgrims:

> In this year in which Iran is the threshold of an Islamic Republic, and because of unjust propaganda of the foreigners, it is possible that Moslems from various countries not be informed of the depth of the Islamic movement in Iran. Therefore, it is necessary that religious leaders, speakers and scholars, with whatever means that are available introduce this sacred movement. The other pilgrims must realize that the goal of the Iranian Moslems is to establish an Islamic government under the banner of Islam and under the guidance of the Holy Quran and the Prophet of Islam so that our Moslem brothers will come to know that our only goal is Islam and we only think about the establishment of a just Islamic government.[122]

As per Henner Furtig, "Iranian pilgrims were encouraged to publicize the slogans and demand of the Iranian Revolution during Hajj and to appeal for its imitation."[123] Saudi Arabia, being the host and proud supervisor of the Hajj, saw it as a direct and existential threat. An organized propaganda campaign by Iran complemented the efforts against the legitimacy of Arab monarchies. As Henner Furtig states, "An organized and expensive anti-Saudi propaganda campaign was carried out throughout the Arab and Islamic world. Daily newspapers were distributed free of charge, hundreds of books and booklets were

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119 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 27.

120 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 24.

121 Furtig, 24.

122 Furtig, 24.

123 Furtig, 24.

published, video tapes and cassettes were produced and distributed in the Western world, and pamphlets and leaflets were distributed inside the mosques, particularly on Fridays–all in an attempt to discredit Saudi Arabia."[124] The monthly journal of the IRGC illustrates an example of anti-Saudi rhetoric:

> Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country which is possessed of a centrality for Moslems of the world and must naturally serve as a promoter of the Islamic ideology, has so intermixed with the West that it can hardly be called independent. The entire resources of oil in Saudi Arabia are indisputably controlled by American trusts; and while the people there live in poverty, misery and ignorance, and one day's oil income of the country can cause a fundamental change in their situation, the government executes the West-dictated policies and strives to stabilize the economic situation of western industrialized countries which are the main exploiters of today's world.[125]

In order to attain secure political positions in the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, politicians vehemently used anti-Saudi rhetoric showing their pro-revolutionary sentiments.[126] Then-President Abdolhassan Banisadr stated regarding the Gulf States,

> We do not consider them to be independent governments…and therefore do not wish to cooperate with them…; if the people in the Arab states…adopted the techniques developed by the Iranian revolutionaries, not one of these regimes would remain in existence, and they know it…All these overlords will be like dust in the wind.[127]

This hatred rhetoric coming from the most senior officials was the initial worrisome event for Saudi Arabia.

Iranians started criticizing Saudi Arabia's legitimate right to protect Mecca and Medina and wanted a Joint Islamic Committee to manage the affairs of the holy places of Mecca and Medina.[128] Initially, Saudi Arabia was not ready for this level of hostile Iranian onslaught. Arousing the issue of legitimacy of guarding the holy places was a limit for Saudi Arabia, however. The response of Saudi Arabia was in the form of a counter

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[124] Furtig, 24.

[125] Furtig, 25.

[126] Furtig, 25.

[127] Furtig, 25.

[128] Furtig, 27.

campaign against the exporting ambitions of Islamic revolution. This was to be followed by an epoch in the Middle East history, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) which was to further nurture the seeds of Saudi-Iranian rivalry (sowed by Iranian Revolution).

The Iran-Iraq War was the first episode of rivalry, where Saudi Arabia provided full support to Iraq in its ambition to oust the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. This started a chain of events where both countries are at daggers drawn and noticeably on the turf of some other country. In the ensuing paragraphs, I will take up three case studies to evaluate how the two countries are pursuing their objectives, undermining the others to attain their regional superiority, and in turn destroying the peace of the region. Case study 1 will encompass the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), case study 2 will include the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the politically destabilized theater of Iraq after Saddam Hussein and case study 3 will analyze both countries' involvements in civil-war torn Syria after the Arab Spring.

B. CASE STUDY 1: IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980–88)

The Iran-Iraq War is considered the longest modern interstate conventional war, where the two sides kept fighting for nearly eight years.[129] It can be called the first backlash by the Arab world in response to Iran's calls for exporting revolution in an attempt to incite the general masses of the Arab world. On September 22, 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran. Iraq had conceived one of the objectives of this war was to create preconditions for the tumbling of the Iranian revolutionary leadership.[130] The Iran-Iraq War and its associated events had a deep impact on Saudi-Iranian relations. Although Saudi Arabia did not openly support Iraq, it visualized, in this war, the accrued benefits of Iran's defeat.[131] The visualized objectives of the war such as the weakening of the revolutionary government compelled Saudi Arabia to provide covert but full support to Iraq in its attempt to uproot the newly established Iranian revolutionary government.

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129 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 1.

130 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 61.

131 Furtig, 63.

Saudi Arabia was visualizing this war not only as an opportunity to defeat revolutionary Iran but also to avoid Iranian victory resulting in a Khomeini-like government in Iraq since the demographic profile of Iraq supported this possibility. Victory for Iran meant complete domination of Iran in the region and Saudi Arabia to face the threat from two directions (i.e., North and East). Henner Furtig explains intricately Saudi Arabia's aim about the output of the war:

> Saudi Arabia, therefore, did its utmost to prevent an overall Iranian victory, short of actual military participation in the war. There was not only the danger of a direct confrontation with Iran on the battlefield but also a defeated Iraq turning into Khomeini-style fundamentalism which would create the possibility of a war on two fronts – not necessarily a military war but definitely an ideological and political war.[132]

The official stand of Saudi Arabia was neutral and did not openly back Iraq, mainly not to antagonize Iran as well as its Shi'i population in the oil-rich Eastern region of the country.[133] "Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al Faisal described the war as 'conflict between two brother Muslim countries that had to be brought speedily to termination' and not a conflict in which we want to support one side against the other."[134] There is evidence regarding Saudi Arabia's prior information of Saddam Hussein's plan of invasion and tacit agreement of rendering support to Iraq, however. As per Henner Furtig, "there are strong indications that Saddam Hussein did inform Saudi Arabia of his plan of invasion, bearing in mind that Iraq and Saudi Arabia had signed a security cooperation agreement in February 1979, followed by security meetings during first half of that year."[135] The initial news of the Saudi-Iraq alliance started surfacing after the telephone call of the Saudi King to Saddam Hussein. With regard to a telephone call by the Saudi ruler King Khalid ibn Abdul Aziz, Iraqi News Agency had been reportedly narrating the Saudi ruler's complete assurance of full support to Iraq in its war with Iran, the enemy of the Arab Nation.[136] Radio

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132 Furtig, 65.

133 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 76.

134 Hiro, 76.

135 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 62.

136 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 76.

Riyadh confined the interpretation of the call as the King's concern about the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran, however.[137] As per Henner Furtig, "during the very first days of the war Saudi Arabia tried to avoid being labeled an official ally of Iraq, fearing Iranian retaliation."[138]

Saudi Arabia provided a wide array of support mainly in terms of rendering diplomatic, financial, logistic, and even operational support. As for Iran, Al Saud did not leave any area where it could provide assistance to Iraq including financial, intelligence, and weaponry.[139] The ensuing paragraphs will elaborately survey the kind of support rendered by Saudi Arabia to Iraq, mainly due to its newly emerged enmity with Iran (destined to be transformed into an enduring rivalry).

1. Financial Support

Saudi Arabia had been the biggest financial supporter to Iraq during this war. The reason for providing huge financial support was to keep the support clandestine and not disclose it to Iran.[140] Saudi Arabia especially exploited its dominating position in OPEC and created conditions favoring Iraq as well as harming Iran. As Dilip Hiro states, "According to Tehran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait signed secret agreements to raise their oil outputs by one million and 800,000 barrels per day respectively, and contribute the sales revenue to Iraq's war effort."[141] In order to minimize Iran's ability to earn foreign exchange direly needed for supporting war expenses, OPEC set the quota for Iran at 1.2 million barrels per day without increasing the prices.[142] Saudi Arabia also raised oil production in the market to disrupt Iran's oil export in the garb of "market share strategy."[143] Iran termed

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137 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 62.

138 Furtig, 63.

139 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?" *The Iran Project* (blog), September 28, 2016, http://theiranproject.com/blog/2016/09/28/invasion-revisited-saudi-arbia-backed-saddam-wars-iran/.

140 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

141 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 76.

142 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 62.

143 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

Saudi strategy as a deliberately hostile attempt by Saudi Arabia to put pressure on the Iranian economy and ultimately affect the outcome of war.[144] As Henner Furtig explains:

> During an OPEC ministerial meeting in December 1982, the Saudi delegation defeated an Iranian initiative to set production quotas determined by each member country's need for foreign exchange, the size of its population, the capacity of its oil reserves and the quantity of its petroleum exports in the preceding decade. In addition, it successfully organized opposition to the election of an Iranian Secretary-General for OPEC during that meeting, although it was Iran's turn to fill the post.[145]

In addition to creating favorable conditions in OPEC, Saudi Arabia provided extensive monetary support to Iraq throughout the war. It rendered financial assistance to Iraq, amounting to US$10 billion between November 1980 and September 1981. This included shipment of military and civilian supplies amounting to US$ 6 billion until April 1981 and US$ 4 billion up to December 1981.[146] Iran views Saudi oil money as the main source of finances for Iraq during the war. Reportedly, once Iran managed to break the siege of Khorramshahr by pushing back Iraq with heavy casualties, Saudi Arabia provided US$ 20 billion in the form of aid to support Iraq in continuing the war.[147] Saudi Arabia has also been reportedly offering the role of mediator and even offered to pay for Iraq during its weapons deal with France worth 10 billion French francs.[148]

Saudi's version of its support to Iraq became more public after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991. As per Reuters on January 15, 1991, King Fahd stated, "the total value of the funding, interest free loans, and other support on the form of oil cargo and facilities were over US$ 27.2 billion."[149] Evidence claims Saudi Arabia was completely financing this war. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia himself confessed during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait by saying, "the action of the leader of Iraq (in invading Kuwait) showed his ingratitude to the Saudi military supports for him during eight years of war against Iran. If Iraq says it

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144 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

145 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 66.

146 Furtig, 64.

147 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

148 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

149 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

sacrificed its forces, we say we sacrificed our money, our modern weapons, and our international cooperation during the war."[150] Saudi Arabia was solely managing the finances of the war ranging from procurement of military equipment to the pay of normal soldier. One of the Saudi defense ministers stated, "Iraq now aims to invade Saudi Arabia, and perhaps it forgot in that war time we even provided its soldiers' beverages."[151]

2. Logistical Support

Apart from providing direct financial support, Saudi Arabia provided comprehensive logistic support to Iraq. Iran, owing to its complete domination of the Persian Gulf, posed serious repercussions to Iraq for smooth export of its oil. The strong Iranian naval forces (as compared to Iraq) further complimented the Iranian strength by posing a strong naval blockade.[152] To counteract this, Saudi Arabia provided all of its Red Sea ports, for transportation of civilian and military imports for Iraq. The port of Qadimah, North of Jeddah, became the main terminal of all the supply routes for Iraq.[153] Likewise, when Syria, Iran's ally in the war, closed the Iraqi oil pipeline running from Iraq to the port of Baniyas in Syria, it was Saudi Arabia who came to rescue Iraq and continue its oil export through its newly constructed pipeline from Rumailah (Iraq) to Yanbu (Saudi Arabia).[154]

3. Operational Support

Apart from comprehensive financial and deliberate logistic support, Saudi Arabia also provided operational support to Iraq during the war. Saudi Arabia allowed its air space to be used by Iraqi warplanes and allowed Iraqi aircraft to be placed on Saudi soil, thereby not only lessening their exposure to the Iranian air force but also providing the Iraqi air force the opportunity to carry out attacks from multiple directions .[155] Additionally, Saudi Arabia provided elaborate intelligence support to Iraq during the entire course of the war.

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150 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

151 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

152 Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, 64.

153 Furtig, 64.

154 Furtig, 65.

155 Hiro, *The Longest War*, 63–76.

Iran alleged that Saudi Arabia used its latest Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) flying radars for gathering and dissemination of strategic intelligence information to Iraq with the consent of United States.[156] Saudi Arabia also provided high-resolution satellite imagery of Iranian forces' deployments to Iraqi forces thus giving a cutting edge to Iraq over Iran. Likewise, Bandar bin Sultan (then ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the U.S) mentioned Saudi Arabia acting as mediator and providing important intelligence information collected by the U.S. to Iraq.[157]

The preceding paragraphs provided evidential support where Saudi Arabia provided an all-out support to Iraq with the primary aim of defeating Iran. Saudi Arabia visualized Iran's victory as a catalyst in spreading the Islamic revolution in Iraq. Iranian victory would also undermine the regional stature of Saudi Arabia. Likewise, they viewed Iranian defeat as a means to not only shun the ideology of spreading revolution but also weaken its root in Iran, a condition favoring their monarchies. The indecisive culmination of the war, however, did not yield the desired results for either state. Later on, events like the ousting of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the sprouting of the Arab Spring, and related subsequent chaos in the region, once again provided the environments where the two countries were pitched against each other but in arenas other than their homelands. The next case studies will analyze the Iraqi and Syrian crises where both Saudi Arabia and Iran found an opportunity to spread their influence due to local instability and unrest.

C. CASE STUDY 2: IRAQ—THE THEATRE OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY

Iraq has been the victim of terror, where the politically motivated groups are perpetrating violence and often noncombatant civilians are becoming the victims. The political mess in the country has resulted in an extremely high number of casualties. After the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraq came into the attention of Saudi Arabia and Iran to establish their influence. Later on, the instability in Iraq was further compounded by inclusion of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in the game of thrones. To understand the situation

156 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

157 "Invasion Revisited: How Saudi Arabia Backed Saddam's War on Iran?"

in totality, the geo-politics of Iraq from the 2003 U.S. invasion until now can be divided into two distinct time-periods. The initial period is the U.S. occupation of Iraq (2003–10) and the second is the rise of ISIS especially in 2014. The initial time-period has witnessed more Saudi-Iranian competition for gaining influence in Iraq, which I will elaborate upon in the ensuing paragraph. During the time period of ISIS's emerging influence, it was mainly Iran that provided active support to arm proxies against ISIS, which I will explain in the later part of the Iranian role.

The time of U.S. occupation, witnessed systematic increase in Iranian influence, which Saudi Arabia proactively countered. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a political vacuum in the country, which Iran and Saudi Arabia exploited to pursue their geo-political objectives, spreading their influence by supporting proxy wars and thus destroying the peace of the country. The ensuing paragraphs will discuss how Iraq became the arena for Saudi Arabia and Iran to fight against each other and how the two countries support their sponsored groups to enhance their influence and deny it to the other.

The overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003 transformed the country from somewhat stable into a weakly institutionalized state, susceptible to enhanced regional influence. The demographic profile of the country helped the Shi'i faction to come to power, which had remained suppressed during Ba'athist rule. Saudi Arabia, which was not in favor of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, saw the Shi'i rulers in Iraq as a threat to its influence. Iran could not have visualized a better situation in Iraq and started increasing its influence in the country.[158] With a demographic profile supporting Iran, it was all set to increase its influence in Iraq.

1. Iranian Role

Iran fully exploited the events following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam Hussein as an opportunity for enhancing its influence in Iraq. With the drive of exporting Islamic revolution, Iran has enduring interests in Iraq especially about the role

[158] Emma Ashford, "The Saudi-Iranian Cold War," The International Security Studies Forum: Policy Roundtable 2–4, February 20, 2018, https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/2-4-saudi-iranian.

of Iraqi Shi'i in politics.[159] Iraq with its supporting demographic profile and without Saddam Hussein was an ideal turf for Iran to enhance its influence. Iranian interests in Iraq are driven by multiple factors including religion, ideology, security, and economy.[160] Iran started with systematic increase in its influence in Iraq. As per Alireza Nader et al., "Iran has pursued three distinct avenues of influence in Iraqi politics:

- Promoting, its religious influence and propagating velayat-e-faghih.
- Positioning itself as the main arbitrator of Iraqi political disputes. Iran helps its various allies gain power through Iraq's political process, then, act to balance them against one another, eventually serving as the power broker to resolve the very disputes that it often played a role in causing.
- Calibrating violent activity among loyal Shi'i militias as means of pressuring political actors."[161]

Thereon, Iranians started exploiting their established networks and actively yet covertly rendered support to these networks. After the toppling of Saddam Hussein's government, Iranian leaders nurtured lasting bonds with all significant Iraqi opposition groups. Due to their long adversarial relationship with Saddam Hussein, the Shi'i and Kurdish opposition were in ideal position to take advantage of the power vacuum and became Iranian clientele in Iraq. Iranian very articulately designed its covert support to the like-minded factions of the Iraqi populace, thereby enhancing its role not only in Iraq but regionally.

During the initial periods, Iran increased its extensive intelligence and covert action network but in a dormant role. Then there was a policy change from Iran's dormant role owing to its initial cautious approach to avoid U.S. direct reaction to a more aggressive role

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159 Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 562.

160 Cordesman, 562.

161 Alireza Nader et al., *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for U.S.–Iran Cooperation?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_PE151.pdf.

to enhance influence in Iraq. Iran was now viewing Iraq not as an enemy but as a weaker state with no potentials to harm Iran. In 2005 and 2006, Iran actively started promoting various Iraqi armed groups especially Shi'i groups believing that Iraqi Shi'i are more likely to prevail and well-disposed to Iran.[162] This active support was in the form of funding, training and providing weapons to the like-minded factions in Iraq with the view to enhance its influence in Iraq.[163] Owing to favorable demographic profile of the country, Iran saw the Iraqi power vacuum as an opportunity for enhancing its influence in a war-trodden country.

Iranian support to these groups was in terms of training, weapons, information, and finances. Iran supported the Shi'i factions, especially the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)/SCIRI/Badr, and the support became more militarized. After the U.S. invasion, SCIRI became more cohesive in the newly formed Iraqi government. Likewise, Iranian relations with other militias like Fadhila and Jayesh al Mahdi (JAM) also flourished thus causing unrest and turmoil.[164] It is also believed that Iran's Revolutionary Guards are helping mobilize Iraqi Shi'i volunteers to fight insurgents. There have been number of splinter groups from JAM. One of them is Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH) which is a militant organization, considered to be extremely loyal to Iran and providing varied ranges of social services as a means to promote pro-Iranian ideology.[165] Kata'ib Hezbollah is another splinter group and is the formulation of Qods Force. Alireza Nader surveys as, "Along with AAH, the U.S. considers Kata'ib Hezbollah a direct-action arm of the IRGC. This secretive group has around 3,000 fighters who are highly loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei."[166] Iranians have been coordinating military activity on behalf of the Iraqi government, liaising with

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162 Kenneth M Pollack, *Prospects for Increased Iranian Influence in Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings, November 15, 2011), https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/prospects-for-increased-iranian-influence-in-iraq/.

163 Pollack, *Prospects for Increased Iranian Influence in Iraq*.

164 Pollack.

165 Nader et al., *Iran's Role in Iraq*.

166 Nader et al.

various Shi'i factions in Iraq.[167] This shows Iran's deep involvement in Iraqi politics by using all means including militancy to increase its influence in the region. This in turn is destroying the peace of Iraq and innocent civilians are becoming the victim of this brutal politics.

Iran played an influential role in shaping the new politics of Iraq. In January 2005, Shi'i-dominated government was elected and formed a new constitution favorable to Iran.[168] As per Alireza Nader, "Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani often acts as a political arbitrator between Iraqi Shi'i parties. He heads all of Iran's activities in Iraq, including overseeing Shi'i militias, disbursing funds to political leaders, and overseeing soft power activities."[169] Reportedly, Qassem Soleimani had been playing a key role in all important Iraqi government discussions. This shows how intricately and deliberately, the Iranians increased their influence in Iraq and the region.

The rise of ISIS and its gaining a strong foothold in Iraq forms another important benchmark in the geo-politics of Iraq. ISIS's substantial advance in Iraq especially after 2014, threatened Iranian influence in Iraq. Iran had been blaming the creation of ISIS on foreign occupation.[170] Iran started its fight with ISIS with the objective of destroying it while maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq. With the preeminence of ISIS's influence in Iraq, Iran activated its client militant groups to fight. In its fight with ISIS, Iran again opted to ignite proxies through all stakeholders, which includes Shi'i and Kurds. As per Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran was the first country to provide [the Kurds] with weapons and ammunition. Among the groups that the West and Iran are empowering, the *peshmerga*, the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK) and the PKK Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) stands out."[171] Iranian support to Iraqi government and

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167 Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Simeon Kerr, "Iran-Saudi Proxy War Heats Up as ISIS Entrenches in Iraq," *Financial Times*, June 25, 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/fdff6240-fc46-11e3-98b8-00144feab7de.

168 Nader et al., *Iran's Role in Iraq*.

169 Nader et al., *Iran's Role in Iraq*.

170 Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, *Iran's ISIS Policy*, (London: Chatham House, 2015), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_publication_docs/INTA91_1_01_Esfandiary_Tabatabai.pdf.

171 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, *Iran's ISIS Policy*.

various militia groups against ISIS, helped in the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and allowed Iran to retain its influence in the country.

2. Saudi Arabian Involvement

The toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime was a major shift in the regional balance of power toward Iran, thus increasing Saudis' perceptions of the threat. Saudi Arabia, right from the outset did not support the U.S. invasion of Iraq and had anticipated the increased Iranian influence in Iraq. The current dominant Iranian role in the politics of Iraq has undermined Saudi Arabia's influence in Iraq. In order to restore the balance, Saudi Arabia is providing all-out support to the Sunni factions against Shi'i groups with the obvious increase in the unrest in the region.[172]

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, though Saddam Hussein's Iraq had also been posing security threats to the kingdom, at least it had also been a balancing force against Tehran's influence in the region.[173] This balance collapsed after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The increased Iranian influence in Iraq compelled Saudi Arabia to render support to the Sunni factions in Iraq. Many Saudi citizens have been reportedly, giving millions of dollars to Sunni insurgents in Iraq.[174] As per the Iraqi government, this money is being primarily used for purchasing of weapons, which include shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles.[175] High-ranking Iraqi officials have reported that most of the Saudi money comes from the donations, called Zakat, collected for Islamic causes and charity. Some of the money is reportedly given to Iraq's insurgents and some is reported to be given to clerics who channel it to the insurgents.[176]

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172 Salah Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/07/AR2006120701070.html?noredirect=on.

173 Daniel L. Bayman, *Saudi Arabia's Own Iraq Nightmare* (Washington, DC: Brooking, 2007), https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/saudi-arabias-own-iraq-nightmare/.

174 Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis."

175 Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis."

176 Nasrawi, "Saudis Reportedly Funding Iraqi Sunnis."

There have been reports of unofficial support rendered especially by the Saudi youth who were religiously motivated to fight Jihad in Iraq. They were called "The Saudis of Iraq."[177] As per Zaki Chehab, "Counterterrorist experts in Saudi Arabia have calculated that the number of young Saudis who participated in Iraq's jihad between 2003 and 2004 exceeded twenty five hundred fighters. Five hundred of these were killed, and Iraqi government arrested mostly the rest of them.[178] The Saudi government did not support these factions, however, due to the fear that "The Saudis of Iraq" might be a security risk for the Saudi government in the future.[179]

With the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and its animosity toward the Shi'i faction, Iran occasionally blamed Saudi Arabia for rendering support to ISIS. A senior Iranian advisor, Hossein Sheikholeslam stated, "As long as Saudi Arabia insists on its support for violence like what it is doing in Iraq through ISIS, we cannot see any improvement in relations."[180] Once a senior Qatari official reportedly stated, "ISIS is a Saudi Project."[181] Saudi Arabia has denied these allegations, however, while blaming the Iraqi government for its sectarian policies and closeness to Iraq.

This conflictual position of both countries and their policy of aggressively following their agendas has been a major cause of unrest in Iraq. As a result, Iraq has been the key victim of unrest, bringing devastating havocs throughout the country. The quest for influence in the region (by both countries) has provoked a long and vicious circle of proxy war in Iraq. Both Sunni and Shi'i militias are involved, resulting in devastating destruction of the region. The number of killings is enormous and the devastation inflicted is massive. In 2016, around 9,764 people were killed in Iraq.[182] Iraq suffered not only in terms of

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177 Zaki Chehab, *Inside the Resistance: The Iraqi Insurgency and the Future of the Middle East* (New York: Nations Book, 2005), 180.

178 Chehab, 180.

179 Chehab, 180.

180 Bozorgmehr and Kerr, "Iran-Saudi Proxy War Heats Up as ISIS Entrenches in Iraq."

181 Steve Clemons, "Thank God for the Saudis: ISIS, Iraq and the Lessons of the Blowback," *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-saudi-arabia-iraq-syria-bandar/373181/.

182 "Statista: The Statistics Portal," accessed on May 28, 2018, https://www.statista.com/statistics/202861/number-of-deaths-in-iraq-due-to-terrorism/.

number of killings but also by the greatest number of attacks in 2016. Although not all the killings or incidents can be attributed to Saudi Arabia and Iran, their sponsored proxies share the major contributory portion of it. The unending surge of violence in Iraq has destroyed the country's infrastructure colossally, and destroyed the peace of the country with spillover effects in adjoining Syria.

D. CASE STUDY 3: SYRIA—THE ARENA OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY

The Arab Spring was a series of revolutionary waves of both violent and non-violent protests in North Africa and the Middle East, beginning on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia.[183] The effects of these quickly spread in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. In most of the countries, the wave of revolutions and protests faded by mid-2012 due to violent responses from authorities, pro-government militias and counter-demonstrators. In Syria, however, the situation got worse and more complicated. The militarized struggle of multiple armed groups against ruling Alawites, brutal response by the government and involvement of a number of players has caused great havoc in the entire country, destroyed the urban areas, and resulted into innumerable deaths as well as displacement of innocent civilians. Syria has now been transformed into a complex arena of militancy, involving regional as well as super powers. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are once again pitched against each other to enhance their influence in Syria. Iran and Saudi Arabia are aggressively supporting their respective factions in their geo-political pursuits, and becoming the major cause of civil war with civilians becoming the victim.

The Syrian crisis started after the eruption of pro-democracy demonstrations in March 2011, in the southern city of Deraa due to the arrest and torture of some youngsters alleged to have painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall.[184] The security forces opened fire and killed some demonstrators. This triggered nationwide unrest and protests, demanding the resignation of Bashar ul Assad. The government's use of force to suppress the protests resulted in a more resilient response from the public and by July 2011,

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183 "Syria: The Story of the Conflict," *BBC News*, March 11, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868.

184 "Syria: The Story of the Conflict."

thousands of people were out in the streets protesting against government throughout the country. The protests started converting into armed struggles when the opposition supporters began to take up arms against security forces.[185] Initially, protests against the regime had ethnic and sectarian reasons but later on, they transformed into a rebel movement dominated by the Sunni Arabs. The regime's tactics of handling the issue sparked sectarian polarization.[186]

The conflict has evolved and attained a sectarian connotation, pitting the country's majority Sunnis against the regime's Shi'i Alawites. Due to the violent reaction from the government to suppress the protests, the hatred toward Alawites that controlled the central power increased. The regime employed largely Alawite gangs known as Shabiha (ghosts) to retaliate against Sunnis, who began charging through Sunni communities, brutally killing and torturing men, women and children.[187] The conflict has drawn regional and world powers into the arena and the rise of ISIS in the country has added further complications in the overall scenario.

Syria is a very important ally for Iran and the only Arab country that supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88). Moreover, both states draw coherence and cooperation from representing the same Shi'i sect of the religion (although there exist differences between them, Syrians being Alawite and Iranians being Twelver Shi'i). More importantly, Syria is important to Iran for its fundamental interests in the Western Mediterranean (i.e., support of Hezbollah, Hamas) for which Syria serves as an important base.[188]

1. Iranian Involvement in the Syrian Crisis

For a layman, the strength of the Iran-Syria nexus appears to be driven by the commonality of being Shi'i-ruled states. Alawites are considered an off-shoot of Shi'i

185 "Syria: The Story of the Conflict."

186 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 207.

187 Ostovar, 207.

188 Ostovar, 205.

Islam, and most Shi'i (Twelver Shi'i) consider Alawites as heretics.[189] David W. Lesch, however, notes that "this alliance—Syria's most important of the last decade—is strategic, and the best explanation for it lies in the old Arab proverb 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' That 'enemy' was Saddam Hussein's Iraq."[190] This alliance gained significant strength during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), where Syria supported Iran. Iran's alliance with Syria along with Hezbollah and Hamas enhances its area of influence greatly.[191] Therefore, Syria turns out to be an ally of strategic importance for Iran. With increased influence in Iraq after the ousting of Saddam Hussein and its further expansion into Syria, Iran envisages its dominating role in the region. With the advent of rebellion in Syria and the impending fall of Assad's government, however, Iran felt not only losing its strategic partner in the region but also its important base against Israel. Iran considers any movement to weaken the Syrian government as detrimental to Iranian interests. Thus, Iran's alliance with Syria falls in the ambit of both identity as well as interest-based arguments.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran had learned how to find the entry way and successfully exploit the power vacuums for strategic gains. Iranians started their aggressive covert support to the Syrian government for suppressing the opposition. When and how Iran started intervening in Syria is not clear yet effort encompassing military, security, intelligence, and financial assistance can be seen since 2011.[192] Iranian support to Assad's regime has always been covert and denied by the Iranian government. The ensuing paragraphs will survey the ways and methods Iran used to support Assad's regime in Syria.

Iran, right from the outset of the uprising, alleged the involvement of external forces and termed this uprising as part of an international conspiracy to weaken the Syrian government (bastion of Iranian influence).[193] Iranian former ambassador to Syria, Ahmed Mousavi stated, "Current events in Syria are designed by the foreign enemies and make

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189 David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 125.

190 Lesch, 125.

191 Lesch, 126.

192 Ostovar, 208.

193 Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 28.

the second version of the sedition which took place in 2009 in Iran. The enemy is targeting the security and safety of Syria ... [The protestors] are foreign mercenaries, who get their message from the enemy and the Zionists."[194] Iran provided full support to Syria and legitimized its actions by saying the uprising was foreign sponsored.

The Iranian support started covertly in the field of intelligence provision. Iran provided technical support in terms of monitoring mobile communication as well as the Internet. As per David W. Lesch, "There were credible reports that Iran was providing Syria with substantial assistance, particularly in surveillance technology to monitor email, mobile phones and the Internet, in order to combat the social media roots of the uprising and fight back against cyber warfare conducted by opposition groups."[195] This helped in identification of the groups involved in uprising and led to the subsequent operations.

The extent to which the IRGC is involved can be comprehended from the fact that the effectiveness of the Syrian military had been degraded by the desertion of the Sunni commanders and recruits. The remaining forces were suffering from internal divisions and inexperience in urban warfare. Likewise, Shabiha gangs (Alawite groups in support of the Assad regime) were also ineffective against the unfavorable demographic reality (i.e., Sunni Arabs 60% and ruling Alawite 10%). The rebels had the clear advantage of getting support from the Sunni-dominant society. All these realities put the Assad regime in a fragile situation. Under these conditions, the IRGC spearheaded the establishment of paramilitary forces on the similar grounds under which the Basij was formed in Iran, because they were better suited for the urban kind of warfare.[196]

Moreover, the IRGC and Quds Force were there on the ground in Syria for advising and training Assad's military. Since 2012, Iran has been sending hundreds of IRGC and Basij fighters to Damascus.[197] Reportedly, there are a few hundred commanders from Quds Force and other IRGC divisions in Syria along with thousands of Basij militiamen involved

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194 Lesch, 28.

195 Lesch, 128.

196 Lesch, 210.

197 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 208.

in training and advising missions. In May 2012, Quds Force officer Esmail Qaani admitted that Iranian units were providing assistance to Syrian forces.[198] The training included specializing in how to suppress the protests through use of force.[199] Mohsen Chirazi was employed for his role as the head of the IRGC's operation along with the additional task of imparting training to the Syrian forces. Likewise, Qassem Soleimani was exclusively employed in Syria for provision of material support to Syrian intelligence.[200]

Between 2011 and 2012, the sphere of Iranian support reportedly increased and became more tangible in terms of material as well as financial support. This included transfer of weapons, material aid, and IRGC personnel to Syria. Iran had been transferring this support very covertly via different private airlines operating under the cover of humanitarian assistance provision to the Syrian people. Iran's Mahan Air is reportedly involved in providing financial, material, and technological support along with transportation, funds transfers and personnel travel services to Quds Forces. Reportedly, 117 aircraft have been used by Iran in transporting all kinds of support including weapons to Syria by air using different companies: Iran Air, Mahan Air, and Yas Air.[201] Reportedly, Iranian planes delivered supplies to Syria on a daily basis in the period between 2012 and 2013. Turkish authorities intercepted one cargo of weapons like AK-47s, assault rifles, machine guns, and ammunition in March 2011.[202]

Likewise, the IRGC has also formed and trained forces that have been operating in parallel with the Syrian forces, against the rebels. Jaysh al Sha'abi (People's Army) is one organization with a strength of 50,000–60,000 individuals. The IRGC has provided training, advice, weapons and equipment to the militia since 2012. The militia has been actively participating in Damascus and Aleppo both unilaterally and in combination with regime forces. The IRGC refers to them with different names including People's Army, the

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198 Ostovar, 209.

199 Ostovar, 128.

200 Ostovar, 208.

201 Ostovar, 208.

202 Ostovar, 208.

Popular Defense and Syrian Basij. Most of the recruits come from Alawite and Shi'i background.[203]

Iran's Qassem Soleimani and Hezbollah have created the Alawite and Shi'i-dominated militia called National Defense Force (NDF).[204] The NDF is the largest militia network in Syria, formed by amalgamation of local populace and other pro-Syrian government militant groups. The NDF employs local volunteer fighters and the IRGC supervises their training in urban and guerilla warfare. Moreover, Iran has organized, sponsored, and equipped a large number of Shi'i fighters for fighting against rebels and saving Assad's regime. The fighters have been recruited from around the world on the sectarian (Shi'i versus Sunni) slogan. Iran is reportedly paying salaries to these groups fighting for Assad's regime. One of the important groups includes Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba; main pro-Syrian government militant organization in the battle of Aleppo and also suspected to have executed 82 civilians.[205] The main motivation of the IRGC for establishing these militias was to keep Assad's regime from collapsing.[206] There have been reports of IRGC direct participation in limited operations.

There have been reports of Iranians' active participation in operations encompassing intelligence gathering and identifying enemy locations/targets. There have been Iranian casualties as well; the highest-ranking official killed was Hassan Shateri, a senior Quds Force officer who was symbolized as a martyr by Khamenei.[207] This shows the level of Iranian involvement in Syria and its determination to maintain the Assad regime.

Iran has also been rendering massive economic support to the Syrian forces. As per U.N. special envoy for Syria, "Iran has been spending between $6 million to $35 million

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203 "The Assad Regime: Iran's Proxy in the Syrian Civil War," *United against Nuclear Iran: Iran's Business Risk*, accessed May 29, 2018, https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/assad-syria.

204 United against Nuclear Iran: Iran's Business Risk, "The Assad Regime: Iran's Proxy in the Syrian Civil War."

205 *United against Nuclear Iran: Iran's Business Risk*, "The Assad Regime: Iran's Proxy in the Syrian Civil War."

206 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 211.

207 Ostovar, 215.

annually to support Assad's regime."[208] Along with this, there have been increased economic ties between the two countries including a Free Trade Agreement in 2012 to enhance bilateral trade from $700 million to $2 billion. Moreover, Iran is using its own oil tankers for the carriage of Syria's embargoed crude oil by hiding its origin and providing access to the market. Iran has also been reportedly assisting Syrian forces by fueling Syrian Army military vehicles either through direct shipment of oil or by providing credit lines to procure the fuel.[209]

2. Saudi Involvement in the Syrian Crisis

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are critical to the happenings in Syria and see their defeat as their opponent's increased influence in the region, at the cost of their own reduced interests. Iran is providing all-out support to its ally, the Syrian government in the current civil war. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is backing Sunni rebels in their struggle against the oppressing rulers. Both countries are trying to gain influence in Syria, a society severely divided into sectarian, ethnic, and political lines.[210] The sufferers are the Syrian people, as their country has become another arena for Saudi Arabia and Iran to fight against each other for accomplishing their geo-political aims.

The relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria worsened intensely after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, who was very close to the rulers of Saudi Arabia.[211] The intensity of hostility kept on rising and both sides started engaging each other with accusations. Syrians alleged the Saudis supported anti-regime Salafis in Syria.[212] In 2011, with the rise of unrest in Syria and the government's brutal actions, the initial response of Saudi Arabia was careful, waiting for the Syrian government to address the issue through

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208 United against Nuclear Iran, "The Assad Regime: Iran's Proxy in the Syrian Civil War."

209 United against Nuclear Iran, "The Assad Regime: Iran's Proxy in the Syrian Civil War."

210 Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, *The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify* (Arlington: CNA Strategic Studies, 2013), http://libguides.nps.edu/citation/chicagonb#report-think .

211 Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 145.

.212 Lesch, 145.

dialogues and reforms.[213] When the situation in Syria became more fragile for the ruling government, however, Saudi Arabia started envisaging it as an opportunity to reduce Iranian influence in the Middle East and enhance its own in Syria.[214]

Saudi Arabia is providing physical as well as moral support to the suppressed Sunni faction of the country. Physical support is manifested in the form of vast financial support as well as provision of weapons to various rebel factions with the ultimate objective for regime change.[215] Likewise, Saudi Arabia renders diplomatic support by raising its voice in the international forums against human rights violations by the Syrian government against the Sunni faction. Before analyzing the ways and methods by which Saudi Arabia is rendering support to various factions of Sunni rebels, I will explain the major rebel groups and promoting ideologies.

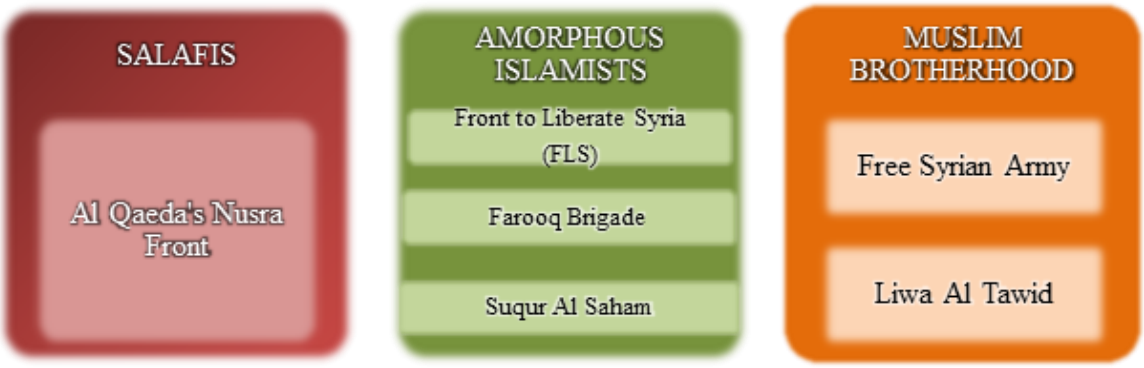

Figure 2. Rebel Groups in Syria

There is a multiplicity of rebel groups operating in Syria, categorized according to their promoting ideologies. The major constituents of rebels fighting against the Syrian government are Sunnis, who despite being in the majority do not enjoy the power in the

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213 Lesch, 145.

214 Lesch, 145.

215 Daniel Wagner and Giorgio Cafiero, "Saudi Arabia's Dark Role in the Syria Conflict," *Huffpost* (blog), August 07, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-wagner/saudi-arabias-dark-role-i_b_3402447.html.

country.[216] Rebel groups are divided into multiple factions owing to their differences, however, especially in the role of religion in an envisaged post-Assad scenario.[217] As Afshon Ostovar and McCants explain, "We can distinguish four categories of Sunni Arab rebels based on their political goals and allegiances: Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups, amorphous Islamists and secularists."[218]

Salafis include groups like Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front, who reject the democratic form of governance and promote the idea of an Islamic emirate through armed force, as well as the Syrian Islamic Front (SIL) advocating for establishing an Islamic state through the political process. Amorphous Islamist groups include the Faruq Brigade and Suqur al-Sham under the umbrella of The Front to Liberate Syria (FLS). Members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are also called Ikhwanis. Some of the Brotherhood groups are part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but groups like Liwa' al-Tawid do not consider them as part of FSA. Finally, the secularists include many groups fighting under the umbrella of FSA; they believe in a secular and democratic form of state.[219] Owing to the complexities of the rebel groups, it is difficult to ascertain how and to whom Saudi Arabia was rendering assistance.

There have been reports of Saudi Arabia's assistance to multiple factions of rebel groups through multiple ways. Saudi Arabia has been a major supplier of military as well as financial assistance to the several rebel groups.[220] Reportedly, since January 2012, Saudi Arabia has started funding rebel acquisition of weapons.[221] Reportedly, Saudi Arabia started delivering weapons and funds through the Syrian National Council (SNC); SNC pledged to form an office to unite the rebels under SNC.[222] SNC could not unite the rebel

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216 Ostovar and McCants, *The Rebel Alliance*.

217 Ostovar and McCants.

218 Ostovar and McCants.

219 Ostovar and McCants.

220 "Syrian Crises: Where Key Countries Stand," *BBC*, October 30, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587.

221 Ostovar and McCants, *The Rebel Alliance*.

222 Ostovar and McCants.

groups, however, so FSA established its own political front for receiving funds and weapons. Saudi Arabia was the main source of funding for the FSA.[223] Saudi Arabia has financed a large purchase of infantry weapons including recoilless rifles, antitank weapons, etc. Most of the weapons were delivered via the Turkish border in the north and the Jordanian border in the south.[224] Saudi Prince Bandar Bin Sultan was appointed by Saudi Arabia to lead the efforts to topple Assad's regime. Saudi Arabia has been reportedly sending prisoners sentenced to death to fight in Syria.[225]

Saudi Arabian support was not confined to the FSA but was also extended to other groups. Reportedly, Saudi Arabia has also been sponsoring Al Qaeda's Nusra Front in their fight against Assad's regime. Nusra Front is a Salafist rebel group and is affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Their support was in terms of provision of weapons as well as provision of finances. It has also been suspected that ISIS is getting support from Saudi Arabia. ISIS has reportedly been a main part of Bandar's covert-operation strategy in Syria.[226] The Saudi government has always denied this accusation. There have been signs that now Saudi Arabia has shifted its assistance from extremist groups in Syria to moderate opposition groups including the FSA. The reason for this shift is to help in managing the regional policies to deal with ISIS threat.[227] As per Afshon Ostovar and Will McCant,

> Saudi Arabia has tried to clamp down on the private funding going to the most radical Islamist groups in Syria. When a group of Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia set up a committee to collect private funds for the Syrian rebels, the Saudi Intelligence Security Agency asked them to stop and sign a pledge to that effect. They also announced their pledge over the Internet. Government has clamped down on clerics who are encouraging young Saudi men to go fight in Syria.[228]

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223 Ostovar and McCants.

224 Mariam Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support," *Reuters*, May 31, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight/saudi-edges-qatar-to-control-syrian-rebel-support-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531.

225 "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support."

226 Clemons, "Thank God for the Saudis: ISIS, Iraq and the Lessons of the Blowback."

227 Clemons.

228 Ostovar and McCants, *The Rebel Alliance.*

Syrian ex-pats especially those residing in Saudi Arabia had been a major source of funds, especially during the initial period. As per Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, "an estimated 400,000 to 1 million Syrians work in Saudi Arabia, half of whom live in Jeddah. Thirty members of SNC are Syrians living in Saudi Arabia, and an estimated 90,000 more Syrians have fled the conflict to stay with family in kingdom. The Saudi government reportedly leaves them alone to send money to FSA. In July 2012, Syrian citizens, together with members of the Saudi royal family, raised between $30 million and $150 million for the support of the brothers in Syria."[229]

Saudi Arabia's role in Syria is driven by the objective of reducing Iranian influence in Syria along with providing support to the suppressed Sunni populace of the country. Saudi Arabia and Iran are entangled in the struggle to attain regional influence in the Middle East and invest to their best in the adjoining regions facing instability as well as power vacuum (i.e., Iraq and Syria). Post-Arab Spring events in Syria provided an opportunity to Riyadh to form a natural alliance with the efforts of Sunni factions of the country to replace Assad's regime. It viewed this as a two-fold advantage i.e., replacement of Assad's Alawite regime with a Sunni government with increased Saudi influence and decline in the Iranian influence in the country.

E. CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia and Iran form the opposite poles in geo-politics of the Middle East. Their inter-state rivalry has affected the peace and stability of neighboring countries. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is no longer a surreptitious affair and much scholarly work has been done on its genesis/reasons. Over a period of time, the relationship between the states has evolved into a competition with the objective of becoming regional power. The rivalry has evolved into more aggressive pursuits by both countries and has undergone a militant transformation. Both countries avoid direct clashes but openly support proxy wars in the adjoining countries. Iraq and Syria with already prevailing turmoil became victims of the rivalry politics between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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[229] Ostovar and McCants.

Both countries are intent on to causing maximum damage to each other without realizing the impact of their course. As a result, it is the common man who is becoming prey to the proxy wars ignited by both countries for their ultimate objective of becoming the regional hegemon. As said by Karim Sadjadpur, "When the elephants fight, it is the grass which suffers. There have been millions of casualties in the Middle East including Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis. Iranian and Saudi citizens are not the ones who are suffering."[230] Under the umbrella of religion and ideology, both countries have geo-political and economic motives with the ultimate objective of gaining regional influence. Since the arena is outside their countries, it is the populace of those other countries that suffer the most. Afshon Ostovar states regarding this turmoil and chaos, "As the rhetoric and proxy war escalates, neither side appreciates that they are destroying the region."[231] The behavior of both states has destructive consequences for the entire region.

Although multiple factors shape the security dynamics of the Middle East, rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stands more pronounced. The leadership of both countries is deeply engrossed in fueling the enmity instead of dialogues. The situation gets more perplexing as the leaders draw legitimacy for their existence (interpreted in their behavior) by using ideology that exhibits the inherent animosity between them. Under the complex environment, both countries aim for the geo-political and economic aim while denying the same to others. Iraq and Syria, due to power vacuum, have been on the influence agendas of both countries.

The chaos in the Middle East can have devastating effects for the peace of the region. Syria and Iraq have become the breeding grounds for terrorism and massive weaponization, problems that are funded mainly by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Multiple organizations have been formed with allegiance toward either Iran or Saudi Arabia. The ratio of civilian/non-combatant casualties is extremely high. Although, in Syria, there have been many other factors including Russian involvement, Saudi Arabia and Iran remain the major reason for the disturbance and chaos in the country. The policy

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230 Smith, "Bitter Rivals: Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 2."

231 Smith, "Bitter Rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Part 1."

of undermining each other to attain regional influence has tarnished the entire region and threatens to engulf it in greater suffering.

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IV. CONCLUSION

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has a devastating impact on the security dynamics of the Middle East. Both countries have evolved into stubborn rivals and this evolving dimension of the rivalry can be detrimental to the peace of an already chaotic region. Understanding Saudi-Iranian rivalry in its totality can help in better policy formulation and refined efforts leading to the peace of the region. This thesis focused on identifying the compatible theoretical explanations of Saudi-Iranian rivalry and deliberated upon the methods and behavior of both countries to undermine each other. While concluding, the ensuing paragraphs will delineate the summary of thesis research and hypotheses evaluation as well as elaborating where this rivalry is leading.

A. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

This thesis analyzed the grass roots of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, its genesis, and the way it is shaping up and embroiling the adjoining countries in its mayhem. Apparently, an ideologically driven enmity has geo-political and economic aims. Apart from direct rhetorical confrontation, however, both countries have avoided direct clashes and used the arenas other than their own territories. The Middle East, especially Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, has been a region of uncertainty for over four decades. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are using the existing turmoil as a mean to spread their influence. Both countries are at daggers drawn to spread their influence in the region. This is causing sheer violence and massive innocent killings.

In the first part, this thesis explains the theoretical reason of rivalry through the lens of IR. The thesis deduces that the rivalry looks like realist-manifested competition driven by the motive of gaining power. It has other contributory factors explainable through the constructivist lens, however. Realist explanations cover the quest for geo-political influence and fearing others' increasing influence as existential threats for oneself. Constructivists have an explanation for other important factors, however, namely ideological differences, incongruence dilemma, and parochial interests of power brokers i.e., the presence of strong religious clergy in both countries.

Subsequently, this thesis examines three case studies: Iran Iraq War (1980–88), turbulent Iraq since 2003 and war-shaken Syria after the Arab Spring. This analysis identifies the role both countries play to enhance their own influence, undermine the other and ultimately destroy the peace of the region. After examining these case studies, my thesis deduces Iran (except in Iran-Iraq War) as the initiator in the efforts of enhancing its geo-political influence and Saudi Arabia as the reactor. Although both countries toil to attain influence in the region, Iran has mostly been the initiator especially in the prevalent era.

While surveying the Iran-Iraq war, the thesis explored that Saudi involvement was in reaction to the envisaged threat of Iran capturing Iraq. Saudi Arabia envisaged the war as a threat because Iranian victory would mean its complete dominance in the region. At the same time, Saudi Arabia viewed it as an opportunity to reduce the newly emerging threat from Khomeini's Iran. The thesis explores various prongs of support Saudi Arabia rendered in its motive of undermining the then newly emerged rival. The non-conclusive end of the war yielded the transformation of the newly emerged enmity into the lasting rivalry in the following decades.

The other case studies were related to the relatively prevailing era, which explored how both countries are exploiting the instability of Iraq and Syria to exert their influence. The thesis again infers that Iran has been the initiator in its quest of enhancing geo-political influence as it exploited the power vacuum in Iraq after Saddam Hussein. Iran not only enhanced its political influence in these countries but also supported armed militancy by arming various groups. Saudi Arabia's role was again a reactionary one and tried to deny Iranian influence by strengthening Sunnis in Iraq. In this quest for power, both countries are sponsoring militancy in the region and destroying the region's peace.

This thesis will proffer findings based on the hypotheses given in Chapter 1 and will conclude with where this rivalry is leading.

B. HYPOTHESES EVALUATION

1. H1 – Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Is Driven by Religion

My thesis attempted to investigate hypothesis 1: Saudi-Iranian rivalry is primarily driven by religious disputes and sectarian agendas by both states. The behavior as well as policies of both countries are primarily motivated by a desire to spread their brand of Islam beyond their borders. Since most people grade this rivalry as a religiously-driven rivalry, it was very important to understand the correct role and involvement of religion in stimulating the relations in the case of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Is it the main driver as it appears or one of the contributory factors?

The findings of the thesis do not support this hypothesis that religion drives the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the motive of both countries is to promote their brand of Islam. It does not completely negate the involvement of religion in shaping the rivalry, however. Since religious clergy have a strong hold in the policy making of internal as well as external politics, they effectively use religion to legitimize their rivalry and motivate the masses. Moreover, the parochial interests of both countries' religious clout is in keeping the rivalry on, keep creating provocative narratives and publicizing others' actions as efforts to spread their brand of Islam.

While religion has been a significant contributory factor, it is not the main driver of the rivalry. Both countries have enjoyed cordial relations with regional cooperation engagements, especially in the past. The Iranian Revolution and Khomeini's associated ambition to export the ideology was the initial root cause of rivalry. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that both countries are effectively using religion as a political tool to provide a face to their hidden ambitions.

2. H2 – Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Is Driven by Geo-Political Motives

While exploring hypothesis 2 of my thesis, it deduced that while both countries have tremendous drive for increasing their influence, Iran initiates the efforts in its aspirations for enhanced regional influence. Iran's geo-political policy is based on enhancing its influence in the region by using ideology as a tool. The thesis also explored that while Iran mostly initiates the efforts of attaining geo-political gains, Saudi Arabia is

in a reactionary mode and both countries get embroiled in rivalry. The three case studies show how both countries are involved in a struggle for gaining regional influence by using the turf of other countries. In doing so, both countries are sponsoring militancy and perpetuating violence in the region. Iraq and Syria have been war trodden with most of their urban area turned into rubble and massive innocent killings. Although there have been multiple factors in the prevalent mayhem in these countries, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry forms one of the major constituents. The reason for both countries' investment in the prevailing turmoil is to gain enhanced regional influence.

The findings of my thesis support the hypothesis that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is driven by the quest and desire of both countries to achieve geo-political motives of enhanced influence in the region while undermining the other. There has been sufficient evidences that both countries are aggressively raising their client militant groups and providing all-out support to them. As a result, there is an unending upsurge in the violence and militancy in the region. Neither country, however, is ready to give up.

3. H3 – Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Is Due to Perception-Building of Each Other As Rivals

During my research, the thesis explored hypothesis 3 that in the process of state formation and the rise of nationalism, leaders of both countries have built the perception regarding the other country as rival. While this is true and forms one of the constituents of the rivalry, we cannot grade this as the sole reason for the rivalry. During my research, my thesis explored the concept that the presence of strong religious power and its influence on the politics of both countries makes both countries perceive each other as potential threats. Strong and influential religious clergy impart the perception that the others intend to spread their ideology. Moreover, the leaders of both countries also generate these perceptions for state building or imparting nationalism. The hostile perceptions of both countries regarding each other keep embroiling them in antagonizing relations. The hostile perceptions do not form the single most important reason for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but they are contributory factors.

C. WHERE THIS RIVALRY IS LEADING

Different regional issues having varying degrees of impact in shaping the future geo-political environments of the Middle East. Ones that are more significant include the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the eruption of civil wars in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, however, forms the most critical dispute, producing pronounced effects in the prevailing mayhem of the region as well as in shaping the future geo-political dynamics of the Middle East. The distinctive character of this rivalry is that both countries are contesting in the arena of a third country, thus, not only avoiding direct confrontation but also remaining immune to the wrath of their sponsored militancy.

The flavor of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry can be traced as one of the contributing factors in every prevailing crisis of the Middle East including Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry did not form the initial spark of the anarchy in these countries. It definitely has added petroleum to the already lit fire, however, by sponsoring militancy through relentless political, financial, and armed support, thus exploding the conflicts. To increase their influence, both countries have extensively supported client militancy in other countries by raising, funding, arming, training, and at times fighting with the sponsored militants. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are fire-branding the religious legitimacy for their own heinous ends. This has furthered the societal divide in the Middle East by reducing the various groups' acceptance of each other. The unfortunate citizens of selected arena countries are the ultimate victims.

In the proxy wars between various militant factions (clients to either Saudi Arabia or Iran), it is the innocent civilians who are becoming prey to the havocs of militancy. The killings are enormous in number and the wrath of destruction into rubble is massive. The rivalry between the two giants of the Middle East has divided the entire region on a political as well as religious basis. Both countries are generating and spreading hatred and anguish. The prevailing chaos in the region has the potential to engulf the entire region into its wrath.

In order to understand the geo-politics of the Middle East in the prevailing mayhem, it is imperative to understand Saudi-Iranian rivalry deliberately. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry

has more grave consequences for the peace of the region than any other issue in the Middle East including the Palestine-Israel issue. The thesis findings show that although both countries are not actually fighting with each other yet they are involved in a horrendous quest for aspiring enhanced regional influence by vigorously sponsoring militancy. Policymakers in the world should deliberate on this sensitive and ever-increasing rivalry to formulate the policies in mediating the tension between the two giants of the Middle East. Likewise, regional organizations and international organizations should play more assertive role in directing both countries to stop spreading militancy. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, if not checked, has the potential to destroy the regional peace and offers other dreadful global implications.

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