

# EVALUATING IRAN-SAUDI STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN MIDDLE EAST: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

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## **Abstract**

*The strategic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not circumscribed to ideological divergences rather imbibed in multiple factors, stemming from economic, political and social paradoxes. Middle East is witnessing a new Cold War which involves transnational nexus, proxy wars and non-state actors striving to weaken state authority. The insecurity dilemma to keep domestic regimes intact instigates the states to proliferate their ideologies and expand their allies within the region so that a balance of power could be achieved. The struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has become worse since the wave of Arab Spring had shattered the Middle Eastern region. The ideological synchronized countries are dissected into two blocs, one led by Iran which is Shia dominated state and the other have patronage of Sunni dominated Saudi Arabia. The long term power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia to balance out the influence of their respective ideologies makes them involve in proxies wars which are counterproductive and devastating for the regional stability. The peace in the Middle Eastern region would prevail by taking the security dynamics earnestly by all the actors despite having ideological divergences and strategic competition. After all, the regions are connected and security has spillover effects. This paper underscores the strategic competition between the two traditional ideologically confronted states and underline the question of likely implications for Middle East.*

**Keywords:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East, Strategic Competition.

## **Introduction**

**T**he Middle Eastern region is tremendously burdened with ideological competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The dynamic nature of history demands historical trends to be explored to comprehend the ongoing Iran-Saudia rivalry in the Middle East. The rivalry between Shia and Sunni can be traced back to 1400 year old.<sup>1</sup> Since the demise of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the dissection between Shia and Sunni surfaced on the question of real heir of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Importantly, though the diverging beliefs and co-existence have been centuries old, yet, the protagonism can better be comprehended by taking in to account their power struggle in Middle Eastern region.

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The current split between Iran and Saudi Arabia is traced back to Iranian revolution of 1979, which terminated the romanticism between the West and of pro-western leaders of Iran.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, Iran metamorphosed from pro-western state to theocratic state and witnessed the Shia religious leader taking over Iran. The spill-over effects of Iranian revolution can be felt in the surrounding geopolitics. Iran supports Shia countries and communities and promotes its ideology in the Middle East such as Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen etc. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia follows Wahhabi ideology and preaches to Sunni countries. Saudi Arabia always remains concerned at dissemination of Tehran's ideology to Gulf Countries and its extending ties with Sunni states.

The war between Iran and Iraq in 1980s further intensified the rivalry between the two because of Saudi support to Iraq. Subsequently, the US attack on Iraq in 2003 witnessed the empowerment of Shia government after the removal of Saddam in Saudi neighborhood, which is also perceived as the increasing influence of Iran in the surrounding states.<sup>3</sup> The wave of Arab Spring witnessed the Iranian unconditional support to Bashar's regime; however, Saudi Arabia backed the anti-government opposition, the situation turned into civil war. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia supported Sunni government by suppressing the majority Shia protests against the government in Bahrain. Additionally, Iran's nuclear rapprochement which eased out the decade's long tensions with the United States aggravates insecure feeling in Saudi government regarding Iran's potential to reach out to the Shia groups in the region after lifting of sanctions.

### **Sources of Friction**

The paradox of relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is to maintain a balance of power in the sphere of political and religious influence in the region.<sup>4</sup> They seek to maximize their power relative to each other. The major source of antagonism between the two countries arises from the regional power struggle they are involved in. Moreover, the struggle is indirect which involves proxies and ideological dissemination. Besides, the power struggle is not restricted to increasing influence only but it also "intra-regional and extra-regional, intra-state and non-state, direct and indirect, resolute and irresolute, and in-line and in-limbo parties of the rivalry."<sup>5</sup>

Analyzing Sunni-Shia conflict on the basis of level of analysis, on domestic level, Saudi approach to deal with Shiite minority is seemingly rigid which can be substantiated by the execution of Shiite Cleric Nimr al Nimri in January 2016. This act has aggravated fury and rage in Iran, which is led by the termination of bilateral diplomatic ties between both the states. Similarly, Saudi leadership decision to intrude into Yemen war itself indicates its hardened strategy towards Shiite.<sup>6</sup>

On the regional level, there is a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia which is also referred as new Cold War. However, in guise of sectarianism they are seeking regional partners and durable alliances. The regional new cold war can better be understood by scrutinizing the associations at domestic and regional level. The domestic conflicts, transnational nexus and regional alignments are interlinked and overlapping.

Internationally, regions are connected and threats which operate within regions travel globally.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Middle Eastern region and the turmoil it is going through has tendency to impact security at large. The economic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia is to dominate the oil market. Iran and Saudi Arabia are among the biggest oil reserving and producing countries of Organization of Petroleum Exports Countries (OPEC). After nuclear rapprochement, the oil markets are open for Iran to export its oil to the energy starved countries. Therefore, this commodity is used as a weapon to influence the market competition in the region hence, incentives intensify competition between them.

Besides, material sources and paradox of power, rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the geopolitics of the Middle East, religious and ideational/immaterial contradictions create tensions between them. The ideational rifts stems from the religious identities. The religious identities involve the self- identifications of groups to a certain ideology or civilization. Reasonably, Iran identifies itself with the Non-Arab world and Shia country and belongs to Persian civilization. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia identifies itself with Arab world and Sunni ideology, which is centered on Salafism. Therefore, ideational rifts dissect the regions into two blocs. Succinctly, the ideational contradiction and antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran provides a rationale to both the states to capitalize material and immaterial capabilities in order to confer legitimacy to their pursuit of policies in the region and to extend their support to the aligned countries. Saudi perception of Iran's maximizing its influence in the region by alignment with countries Iraq and Lebanon is further substantiated by three developments in the region, primarily, the establishment of Shia central government in Iraq with strong affiliation with Iran. Secondly, the rise of Shia minority groups in Saudi Arabia and their demonstration against the government. Lastly, the Syrian crisis and the emergence of Assad as victor with the help of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah.

The security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran is source of friction within the Middle Eastern region. Security dilemma becomes as insecurity dilemma when security of regime becomes more important than state's internal security. States capitalize on external threats which a state is facing for the sake of securing internal regime. In the same way, Iran and Saudi Arabia support their respective like- minded

regimes even at the cost of internal insecurities. With regards to competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the internal insecurity of regimes within respective countries induces them to dissuade their national insecurity to their foreign relations, to generate, sponsor, or capitalize on overseas conflicts, to 'enjoy' a enduring degree of insecurity abroad and by this means to certify internal security for their regime. The collective consequence of this 'insecurity dilemma' has been the leeway of the depth and scope of Saudi Arabia's and Iran's immersion in regional conflicts abroad for the purpose of ensuring regime security at home.<sup>8</sup>Militarily, Iranian nuclear ambitions which they claim to be peaceful are perceived as matter of insecurity for Saudi Arabia. Iran military modernization is aimed at securing itself from hostile strategic environment. The emerging threats at regional level as well as uneasy ties with dominant powers like US provide justifications for military modernization for Iran.

The competitiveness between Saudi Arabia and Iran is steadily becoming a seminal parameter during economic, military, political, and social developments in the Middle Eastern region. The rivalry stems fundamentally from power struggle, increasing influence and security dilemma between the two rival states. The changing dynamics of Middle East after the wave of Arab Spring tremendously shifted the nature of threats and empower the non-state actors in the state systems and phenomenon of global terrorism.

### **Divergent Ideologies and Proxy War**

History is evident of the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran are not for the first time competing in Middle East to influence the region. After 1978 when Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran lost power, two Yemeni states were fighting against each other for regional hegemony, on the other hand Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty. The ongoing strategic competition between Iran-Saudi Arabia have resulted and into two major proxy wars in Middle East, namely Syria and Yemen. Besides, both countries are in the state of cold war for political influence in other countries like in Bahrain, Lebanon and Iraq yet the situations in Yemen and Syria are of the utmost importance in this respect. The increasing presence of foreign actors in Middle East with presumably sectarian agendas, Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry gave further meaning to the sectarian logic of the war.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the proxy war various opposition groups remained non-aligned and refrained from adopting clear sectarian views. Moreover, they tried to articulate a non-sectarian solution of the Syrian conflict with a clear vision without President Assad. But later, to receive financial support mainly from Arab states in the Persian Gulf modified their tactics towards Saudi-Iran competition and continued their fight against the regime forces.

In Syria, the conflict as a political tension began between the competing entities of President Assad and various opposition groups. The president wanted not

to end up like other dictatorial regimes in Arab states like, Libya and Egypt; he decided to use force to defend his power. Thus, the internal situations aggravated and modulated into a full-fledge civil war which was internationalized. Some countries including Iran and Russian federation backed Bashar Al-Assad while most of Western states including Turkey, and Saudi Arab gave their support in letters and spirit to the opposition groups. Among them not only the Free Syrian Army but also the radical movements like Jabhat-al-Nusra the Sunni Islamist militia were there, its leadership aligned with Jihadists groups which are further connected with Al-Qaeda. This is how the Syrian conflict has become a real bone of contention between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslim and in other terms could be truly called Iran-Saudi Arabia strategic competition in Middle East. For this reason, in Syria various sides have given support to either from Arab states from the Persian Gulf and turkey or from the Iran, Hezbollah and Iraq<sup>10</sup>. Riyadh developed an open and direct policy to topple the current regime with increasing cruelty to replace it with a Sunni led regime titled towards Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

History is evident of the fact that Syria and Iran have cooperated for many years. Yet the elements of cooperation are of great importance for the states. Their relations are mainly political, economic and strategic in nature. A considerable portion of the analysts are of the view that their alliance began in 80's namely after the Islamic revolution in Iran with the establishment of Islamic republic of Iran. Since the very beginning the alliance has remained purely defensive moreover, by this way Iran and Syria responded to the aggressive postures undertaken by Iraq in 1980 and Israel in 1982<sup>12</sup>. Both the actors intended to counterbalance and combat Turkey in the region. Turkey being an American ally and member of NATO is the predominant source of ideological threat to Syria, and Islamic Republic of Iran and Soviet ally that time.

Surprisingly both Saudi Arabia and Iran are alleged for supporting various radical organizations and movements including those who are designated terrorist organization in European Union and United States. Yet in both the cases the support is thought to be ideologically motivated. Iran is often linked with Hamas and Hezbollah, while it is said that Saudi maintained relations with the so called Islamic State and Wahhabis. The former militant organization is to be supported by the Saudi inhabitants with or without the acceptance from their kingdom. Iran is more conscious about their own model of Islamic governance than troubling with international community, while on the other hand Saudi Arabia with a position to assume such kind of posture at the end of 1920s, when the Saudi *Ikhwan* were coerced and today they cannot separate themselves from Global Wahhabi Extremism. When we talk about the ideological difference between Iran-Saudi Arabia, the Iranian support to Sunni Hamas is a prima facie case of the fact that sometimes common

interests are more desirable than the sectarian lines of division. The establishment of radical Sunni organization in Middle East was an existential threat to all Shia Muslims particularly to Iranian Muslims. Since its successful military campaign in Iraq in 2014 the so called Islamic State has posed grievous threats to Iran too.<sup>13</sup>

### **Iran's Nuclear Development and Regional Risks**

The Iran's nuclear developments and a decade old international standoff over Iran nuclear program has captured world attention and is one among prominent security challenges for Middle East and beyond. Keeping in view the Iran's geostrategic importance and its critical involvement in key Middle Eastern issues, such kind of arrangements present significant implications for the future order of the region. Iran's Nuclear deal is consequential not only for nuclear proliferation and international security but for broader Middle East as a whole. The deal will impact one of the key arenas of Iran-Saudi security relations, which is the center of gravity and a bold cause behind cold war between them. Spawning proxy war and regional conflicts from Yemen to Syria and Lebanon and Iraq, the confrontations between these regional actors serve as security and geopolitical background upon which the nuclear deal was forged. How the strategic competition proceeds whether it is resolved and managed effectively or not, or how it escalates will determine the landscape and security dynamics of Middle East for years to come.

Most experts believe that Iran's nuclear deal would mitigate the risks of proliferations and praise the settlement for this cause. The deal can potentially advance the idea of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) free zone in the region. Several analysts however expressed their concerns for the opposite effect. There are widespread doubts that Iran's drive towards weaponization and regional proliferation will speed up nuclear arms race in Arab states especially in Saudi Arabia and UAE which have already embarked on a sort of peaceful nuclear programs. By this way the region will be in the warm sort of cold war where wars of attrition between subordinate will prevail like what we see in Iraq, Yemen and Syria.

Iran's nuclear deal ameliorates its threats to regional security and stability, economic interests could prove the key mechanism to moderate Iran's foreign policy. Some of the prominent analysts opined that Iran's economic development could diminish its engagements in the high-risk and costly conflict in the region. It is the real panacea to increase Iran's economic relations with Arab world that would bolster and strengthen its middle class. Iranian domestic politics has impact on foreign policy, it is believed that nuclear deal would likely unleash new fold internal challenges to the Islamic republic. On the other hand, Iran's economic growth and its global economic integration will not be able to divert the country from its current foreign policy path.

Iran has the capacity to plot contradictions in Middle Eastern region, its nuclear deal is the real contradiction.

Arab States hostility and aggressiveness in the region would weaken Iran's hand in Middle East. As compared to Iran after its nuclear deal, the Arab states are more vulnerable, the growing weakness and instability in Arab world could lead to the political bifurcation of GCC at the hands of Iranian. The nuclear deal would further tilt the regional balance of power towards Iran that's how the Gulf States would rely on external security provisions. Saudi Arabia and its regional Arab allies keeping in view the political scenario of the region would strive hard to overcome the weaknesses and shift back the balance toward the Arab world. In the tandem with Iran's rise and the given regional turmoil, the non-Arab powers is the possibility in case of Arab-Turkey strategic partnership and coordination in the region, is to deal the expanding Iranian influence in the region.

Saudi-Iran competition is likely to reiterate and intensify the area of contention in the upcoming years which include Iran's covert support to the proxy groups fighting in Middle Eastern conflict. Iran is fighting against Saudi Arabia through these groups in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Iraq. Although Saudi Arabia is also alleged for its support to the proxy groups but it is not as strong as the Iranian support. After twenty-five years, Saudi Arabia reestablished relations with Iraq, having a low foothold in Iraq, Saudi interfered in Iraq's internal affairs, calling out Iran and its support for Shiite militia who are fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic state. As both the countries are not directly involved in Iraq war, Iraq government has offered to mediate between the two competitors over increased tensions from Nimr al-Nimra execution in January, 2016.

## **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of winning of civil war by Syria, the growing competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Middle Eastern region by their allies and extension to proxy forces has shaped the region for many years. In combination, Saudi-led Gulf Arab coalition and Iran are the two-major hotspot on their periphery. A considerable rise in the likelihood of a conventional war between the two actors is evident. Although neither Iranians nor the Arabs are actively seeking a war, both the competitors are arrayed against each other's for potential conflict in the region; a degree of uncertainty has led to a higher likelihood of force mobilization. Such movements are the indicators of aggression and could be easily misconstrued, even if they were primarily aimed at confronting an unrelated crisis. In return this will lead to counter-mobilization and escalation of hostility between the Gulf Arab States and Iran, which could potentially ignite a fourth Gulf war.

Although many social sectors of inquiry may have shifted their focus from the study of conventional conflict. The practices and priorities of the Arab Peninsula's foreign policy has remained relative consistent, and demonstrate an increased worrying spectacle in their potential to generate inter-state conflict within the uncertain current threatened environment. Saudi Arabia and Iran are undoubtedly competing for influence in the contemporary Middle East. Their aims are mutually exclusive and their foreign policies are based on divergent principles. In both countries ideology play a pre-dominant role; however, it does not make a sense to say that their political stakeholders do not make rational choices and political calculations. The contemporary Iran-Saudi Arabia relations are characterized by lack of trust and good will.

## NOTES

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