

Saudi-Iran Strategic Competition In Middle East: An Analysis

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Abstract

The region of Middle East has immense strategic importance in global politics owing to its natural resources, geographical location and trade routes. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are the two major power in the region. Both states are trying to secure their strategic interest in the region by using different tactics. The strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region is based on three main objectives; political, economic, and security. Since the exploration of oil in the region, the competition between two states increased dramatically but its rooted centuries back with the concept of ‘Pan-Arab’ and ‘Pan-Persian’. In the contemporary world, the competition between Riyadh and Tehran in the Middle East is gaining significant importance in regional and global politics. This paper only focused on the competition between Riyadh and Tehran to gained and protect political interest in the region. Secondary sources are used to collect data and the analysis are made on the base of qualitative content analysis method.

Key Words: Political interest, Regional Politics, Strategic interest, Strategic competition, Saudi-Iran Relation

Introduction

The word strategic comes from the Latin word “strategos” which means “tricks of war.” The Roman also used the term strategia to define the territories under the control of military commanders (Horwath, 2006). The origin of strategy and its uses in academics have a different opinion but scholars of international politics found the origin of the word strategy in different empires like its Chinese origin is linked with Sun Tzu and Lao Tzu while its Greek origin is linked

with the Byzantine empire as well as it linked with French and Roman empire. But one thing is common the use of word strategy is found in academic writings after 1710. The origin of the term strategy is rooted in military doctrines and the US military definition of strategy is “the art and science of developing and using political, economic, psychological and military force as needed in peace and war” (Waterman, 2019).

The Middle East has immense strategic importance owing to its natural resources,

predominantly hydrocarbons. The region holds more than 52.5% of crude oil reserves in the world and 46% of world natural gas reserves. The geographical location of the Middle East further increases its strategic importance because the region is surrounded by five seas; the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea (Zulfqar, 2018). The region also connects the three-continent; Asia, Africa, and Europe. Furthermore, the region is the chokepoint of three important maritime routes; Suez-Canal which connects the Red and the Mediterranean Sea, Bab-al-Mandab which connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz which connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. These maritime routes have significant importance in the global economy (Paraschos, 2017).

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are the two major powers in the region of the Middle East. They enjoyed a good relationship till the 1979 Iranian revolution and both were the main objectives of the “Twin Pillar” strategy of the United States (Golparvar & Parisa, 2016). The Iranian revolution of 1979 and its impacts on regional politics divert the bilateral relations towards competition. After the worst Tehran-Washington relations, Riyadh became a key ally of the United States in the region. She successfully became a key player in the international oil market and the blue eye of USA while Iran had to join another bloc. Iran engaged in war with Saddam's regime while KSA raised its oil production.

Literature Review

The literature review provides a brief introduction of the competition between the two states, as well as its origin and causes. It also established a theoretical framework for describing and analyzing how the two states are competing the region aggressively by opposing

each other's interests throughout the region. Moreover, it will examine how Saudi Arabia and Iran influence the region of the Middle East to fulfill their strategic interest. Mirza et al stated in a research paper that the core elements owing to which both Tehran and Riyadh are entered into a sphere of influence and rivalry are sectarian antagonism, custodianship of holy places, strategic competition since Saddam's demise, and Iran's nuclear program. They further said that both are supporting different states and different groups on a different pattern like Saudi Arab supported Bahrain's monarch against anti-monarchy group while Iran supported the anti-government protest. The manuscript provides an overview of the rivalry between Saudi and Iran but does not briefly describe it. (Mirza, Abbas, & Qaisrani, 2021).

Khan and Zhaoying stated that states develop their relations with the non-state actor or terrorist group as well as sponsor them against their rival owing to create security problems in strategic areas, to achieve strategic objectives, and to spread specific ideology (A. Khan & Zhaoying, 2020). The article portrayed the real theme of the Middle East in the context of recent conflict escalation. However, Ghattas tried to explain the whole scenario of the Middle East from the 1970s onward and said three major events reshaped Middle Eastern politics; the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, and the siege of the grand mosque in Mecca. The writer also claimed that Tehran and Riyadh are responsible for the weaponized religion (Ghattas, 2020). This book is a masterpiece to understand the root of rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran as well as the output of their harmonization policies. A paper written by Khan et al provides an overview of the Saudi-Iran relations in security dynamics and said that the Saudi-Iran relation is the worst relationship after World War Two. The US invasion of Iraq led the region towards bipolarity, and Tehran and Riyadh entered a power race (R. Khan, Ejaz, &

Jamshed, 2019). The manuscript provides only the overview of their rivalry and causes of rivalry but failed to provide data regarding security dynamics.

Another manuscript by Hadzikadunic articulated that the Saudi-Iran relations faced several ups and downs but both states were the 'Twin Pillars' of the US axis and both were the part of Afro-France Safari club. However, the 1979 revolution diverted relations towards antagonism (Hadzikadunic, 2019). The author focused on the détente phase rather than rivalry and provide huge information but failed the maintain the balance between rivalry and cooperation. Another weakness of the writer is that he cited one source more than twenty times. A book by Hiro concluded the politics and rivalry of the Middle East as 'the cold war in the Middle East'. He particularly focused on Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry and find out some key factors which massively affected the antagonism between the two Muslim states: Islamic revolution in Tehran, Iran-Iraq war, major power interest in the region, desire to become a regional power, and Arab spring (Hiro, 2019). The book provides thoughts provoking information about Saudi-Iran rivalry but less focus on their effects on the region.

The book by Sorenson is divided the book into four sections; the first section explains the historical religious, economic, and political foundation of the Middle East, the second section enlighten the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Arabian gulf area, the third section is about the countries of Eastern Mediterranean and the fourth section is about the countries of North Africa. (Sorenson, 2018). The book provides only introductory statistics about the middle east. Darwich concluded the Saudi intervention as a struggle for status in his research manuscript. (Darwich, 2018). The paper provides a brief overview of the Yemen crisis, its origin, causes, regional involvement, and Saudi intervention.

Zehra et al shortly explained the Iran-Saudi strategic competition in the Middle East in a research paper. The paper provides a concise analysis of their strategic competition in the post-Arab uprising and concluded that Iran was more interested in the Arab Spring as compared to Saudi Arabia because Iran wants the regime changed in the Arab gulf to protect its interest. (Zehraa, Fatima, & Khan, 2018). The paper answered the research questions in brief but failed to maintain balanced in each case. Ossorio, explains the sectarian dynamics of the Syrian crisis very well in his research paper and argued that the sectarian cause is used as a tool to gain the interest of different groups conflicting in Syria. (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019). The paper provides enough data and statistics about the Syrian conflict as well as Iran's involvement too. But the researcher failed to provide statistics about the rebels and their belongings (Salamé, 2010).

Methodology

The goal of this study is to explain the strategic competition of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East particularly focusing political interest. This research will provide a thoughtful manuscript for readers to understand the current strategic competition of Saudi and Iran in the Middle East. To explain the strategic competition between Saudi and Iran in the Middle East this research will explain their conflicting interest in the whole region. The qualitative approach and case study method will be used to answer the research questions. A qualitative research approach is helpful in understanding and exploring the social problem in a better way because the qualitative research approach is concerned with the subjective assessment of the study. To answer the research questions secondary data are collected in the domain of the study. The analyses are made by using the qualitative content analysis method.

Political Interest of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East

The political interest of a state means what are the primary concerns of a state that she wants to pursue at all costs. The political interest of Saudi and Iran in the Middle East can be defined by their involvement in different states of the region by using different tactics. Both Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are supporting nonstate actors like rebels and dissidents in each other sphere of influence with weapons, and training. Strategic guidance, economic assistance, and many more (Mirza et al., 2021). Since the independence of Saudi Arabia relations between both states were normal and both were part of the 'Twin pillar strategy' of the USA. But the Islamic revolution in Iran and its shockwave diverted their political interest in the region. Tehran wants to spread its revolution throughout the world, particularly in the Middle East. Khamenei criticized the monarch of the gulf for the violation of human rights and appeal to change the system of government. In response to, the Iran revolution Saudi Arabia formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to counter the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East. Riyadh not only established GCC but also supported the Saddam regime in the Iran-Iraq war. The political interest of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East can be examined in the following states.

Egypt

The pro-democracy and anti-Mubarak protest of 2011 in the Middle East is known as Arab Spring. The Arab Spring initiated major concerns for both Riyadh and Tehran. It also reshaped their regional priorities. The wave of Arab Spring was started in Tunisia and both Riyadh and Tehran did not show any concern for Tunisia but when the wave erupted in Egypt then both states showed their major concerns. Egypt has very good relations with KSA and President Hosni Mubarak played a significant role in

opposing Iran in the Middle East as well as not establishing diplomatic relations with Iran during his presidency. Mubarak often worked against the interest of Hamas which is backed by Iran. The relations between Egypt and Iran remain uncertain and Iran never gained significant importance in Egypt's foreign policy (Birnbbaum, 2011).

Owing to the Arab Spring Iran planned to strengthen relations with other Middle Eastern states. The regime changes in Egypt opened a window for Iran and Hamas to cooperate. The ouster of President Mubarak shook Riyadh while the Iranian supreme leader and other officials called it the 'awakening of Islam'. The dismissal of Mubarak was the ray of hope for Tehran so, she not only started rhetorical speeches but also label it as the Iranian style revolution by supreme leader Ali Khamenei. The statement of Khamenei further created an illusion to analyze the Arab spring. According to his statement, the regime of the whole Middle East should be changed under the pattern of the Iranian revolution of 1979 (Terrill, 2011).

The Arab spring particularly in Egypt was a major setback for KSA. Riyadh also showed her solidarity with President Mubarak. The then King Abdullah initially condemned the protest and called it 'fitnah'. Later when KSA realized the intensity of the uprising and witnessed the ousting of Mubarak they soften their rhetoric. Riyadh also appeals for a peaceful solution to the crisis. The removal of Mubarak was a major setback for the interest of KSA but it opened the chance for Iran to establish relations with Egypt (Mabon, 2012b). Then the foreign minister of Egypt Nabil al-Arabi stated in April 2011 that, "Egyptian and Iranian people deserve relations which reflect their history and civilization". The statement of Arabi was reacted aggressively by Riyadh and showed their reservations through the platform of GCC about Iran (Farouk, 2014). Later in May 2011, KSA

approved \$ 4 billion in loans for Egypt to strengthen their economic ties.

The Arab spring reshaped not only the politics of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain but shook regimes of the whole Middle East. Though the main objective of Arab spring was regime change it was more horrifying for KSA than for Iran. The quick response of Riyadh and other GCC states was more terrifying than Tehran's response.

Bahrain

Bahrain is an important center of Saudi-Iran strategic competition in the Middle East. The island nation Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni royal family but they are only 35% of the whole population. The Al-Khalifa regime of Bahrain has good relations with Saudi Arabia and both states are connected by the 16-mile-long, King Fahad Causeway. The Bahraini monarch always welcomes Saudi's financial assistance and other cooperation. While the majority population of Bahrain is belonging to Shiism and they have the same ideology as Iran. Bahrain's relationship with Tehran is not become good owing to the claim of Iran on the island. When Bahrain took independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, at that time, the Shah of Iran not only claims Bahrain on a historical basis but publicly announced that the unification would be by force if required (Nuruzzaman, 2013).

The Iranian revolution never changed her claim on Bahrain but was not officially followed up. But in the post-revolution era, the Iranian Naval force drill near Bahraini water forced Manama to request security help from Riyadh. KSA airlifted two infantry brigades to protect Bahrain temporarily (Kamrava, 2012). In December 1981, 73 Bahrainis were arrested and accused of planning a revolution against the Bahraini government. But later their links were identified as a member of the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain but Tehran denied it (Narbone & Lestra, 2015). The bilateral trust deficit and Iran's claim lead to

further antagonism. Bahrain also supported the Saddam regime of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. The majority of the Shiite population in Bahrain was Arabi speaking and the ability of Iranians to influence Arabi speaking Shia Bahrainis was considerable doubt. Because the majority of the Bahraini Shias are spiritually more connected with Iraq as compared to Iran (Rubin, 2007).

The Bahraini uprising was basically against the acting government and their demands were pro-democracy but KSA felt it was a serious threat to its regime so she backed the King Hamid government. KSA forces not only entered Bahrain to topple the uprising however GCC established Gulf Shield forces to protect the whole region. The main objective of the Bahrain spring was political and economic reforms as well as unemployment, discrimination, poverty, and powerlessness of the elected parliament. Initially, both Sunni and Shiite people were participating in the demonstration but later Sunni Protestants evaporated when people demanded the end of the Khalifa monarch (Mushtaq & Afzal, 2017).

The uprising in Bahrain shook the Al Saud regime in Saudi Arabia. The revolutionary actions in Manama would encourage the Saudi population and they may call for regime change in KSA, which was the primary concern of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia sent 1,000 troops to support the Khalifa government on March 14, 2011. United Arab Emirates (UAE) also sent more than 500 police to suppress the protest, as well as other GCC states, providing political support to the operation. To justify her intervention in the domestic affair of Bahrain Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for backing and penetrating the uprising. They claimed their intervention was to protect the island nation from Iranian threat, and not too involved in Bahraini politics (Terrill, 2011). On the other hand, Tehran's response to the Bahrain uprising was not offensive and she demanded UN intervention in Bahrain to stop the killing of innocent Bahrain people. In response to Saudi

and GCC's claim of Iran's support, she denied the claim with fury and called Saudi's intervention an occupation (Mabon, 2019).

On March 21, Bahraini King Hamid stated, "An external plot has been fomented for 20 to 30 years until the ground was right for subversive designs... I announce today the failure of the fomented plot" (Terrill, 2011). Manama accused Hezbollah Lebanon for support the uprising. The Bahraini government also accused Hezbollah that providing training to the opposition at their camps in Iran and Lebanon. Despite all criticism and harsh talks Bahraini government and other GCC states couldn't make public any solid evidence of Iranian involvement in their civil uprising (Mabon, 2019). Later Bahraini government did not approve the registration of other political parties that supports civil unrest as well as Khalifa government crushed other political representations (Ulrichsen, 2013). According to Saimon Mabon, the Bahrain spring was a surprise for Iran and she was not well prepared for that uprising. How Saudi Arabia reacted to the Bahraini spring was more terrifying than her response to any other uprising (Mabon, 2012a).

Syria

Syria was the longstanding Arab ally of Iran in the Middle East and Tehran has several political interests in Syria. Iran has had good relations with Syria since the Islamic revolution of 1979 and she provides diplomatic support to Iran during the decade-long Iran-Iraq war. Though Syria and Iran do not have similar political systems they were on the same page against the Saddam regime. Later in 2011, the Arab Spring further strengthen their cooperation (Sun, 2009). As in other states of the Middle East civil unrest erupted in Syria under the shadow of the Arab Spring and they demanded political and economic reforms later their demand further changed into the removal of Syrian President

Bashar al Assad (Heydemann, 2013). The ruling Alawite group was only 10% of the whole population. The uprising in Syria creates considerable concerns for Iran.

One of the most prominent objectives of Iran's support of Syria is its rivalry with Israel. Iran needs Syrian cooperation in any future confrontation with Israel. Both Tehran and Damascus are supporting Hamas and Hezbollah and Syria is the only way for logistic support to both groups. The Iranians called themselves the leader of the axis of resistance. Iran is helping the Assad government by providing rocket and missile technology. Iran vice president Mohammad Irda Rahimi also publicly stated that his country would fight with an aggressor besides Syria. One of the core interests of Iran in Syria is to secure the supply route for logistical support to Hezbollah Lebanon and other militant groups in the Middle East (Yazgan, Utku, & Sirkeci, 2015).

Interestingly, the Assad government-supported Saudi military intervention in Bahrain in March 2011. However, KSA has maintained a tradition of distrust towards Syria for several years. Although Syria sent 1700 personnel with 300 tanks to Saudi Arabia to participate in the coalition against the Saddam regime during the first Gulf crisis it could not overcome the mutual distrust. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia played a vital role in the de-station of Syrian forces from Lebanon in April 2005, where they had been stationed since the mid-1970s. Since the Arab spring, KSA has been willing to cooperate with Syria on different issues but they do not have the pace from both ends by missing substantial significant common points except Arabism (Bakri, 2011). Tehran has been abused by the US and other Western states for helping Syria to suppress the anti-government demonstrations.

Iran's fear of regime change in Syria is owing to the majority Sunni population and the perception of any change in government will affects the relations with Iran's future cooperation with the Sunni-led new government.

Tehran has also worried about the chances of a pro-US government in Syria (Wastnidge, 2017). Another anxiety for Tehran in changing of regime in Damascus is that it may lose its strong connection with Hamas and Hezbollah as well as it can further affect the Palestine issue. The Syrian civil war has a ray of hope for KSA that there will be a change in government shortly the relations between the two states were never friendly. Consequentially the change will affect the Iranian connections with Hamas and other Middle Eastern states that have always been there but it further distorted the already distorted mutual relations between KSA and the Syrian Asad government.

Iraq

Iraq is one of the primary concerns for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The rivalry for Saddam's regime was the common interest of both states before the invasion of the USA in Iraq. Since the revolution of Iran, the relationship between Tehran and Bagdad faced several ups and downs and the longest ever Iran-Iraq war. After the revolution of 1979 Saudi Arabia supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and KSA supported Saddam economically and politically. KSA provides the revenue of 1 million barrels of oil to Iraq during the war (Hiro, 2019). However, the relations between KSA and Iraq became cooldown owing to the first Gulf war which creates distrust and antagonism between KSA and Iraq. The US invasion of 2003 disturbed the balance of power in the Middle East and after the ouster of Saddam Hussain, Tehran build up a cooperative relationship with Bagdad while Riyadh failed to establish a better relationship with Bagdad as Tehran did. KSA also accused the USA of handing Iraq to Iran on a silver platter. The major concern of Saudi Arabia is Iraq's increasing oil export in the international market (Kilian, 2017).

The growing development of Iraq and its oil export in the international market is a serious threat to Saudi Arabia's status in the international

oil market. The heavy oil export will challenge the influence of Saudi Arabia in the international oil market but that may not be a serious threat for Iran because both Iran and Iraq have a common concern on oil. Despite the current cooperative relations, the legacy of the eight-year war is mostly sobering the relations. Riyadh was curious and have several reservations about the US invasion of Iraq that ousted Saddam Hussain and reshaped Middle Eastern politics. According to Riyadh's views, the US invasion of Iraq provides the opportunity to become a power for pro-Irani politicians. Furthermore, Iran's President Ahmadinejad was the first serving Iranian president hosted by Iraq in 2008. Ahmadinejad also signed a variety of trade agreements for further economic cooperation. Tehran also played a vital role in the settlement between Iraq's political parties, especially between Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr (Terrill, 2011).

Iran's revolutionary forces also provide training, financial assistance, and equipment to Iraq's militant groups like the Mehdi army to fight against the US and later ISIS. In July 2011, Leon Panetta, Defence Secretary of Obama, said that "we are seeing more of these weapons from Iran, they have real heart us". Since the ouster of Saddam Tehran is the largest trading partner of Iraq as well as the largest investor in Bagdad's industrial sector. Tehran also appointed its ambassador to Bagdad in 2006 despite all threats. Iran also supported the Maliki government with all its capabilities on the other hand, while Saudi Arabia's view was different from Maliki's government. In Riyadh's views, Maliki's government was anti-Sunni and anti-Saudi. Riyadh also criticized Washington's policies for supporting the Maliki government (Mirza et al., 2021). In May 2007, King Abdullah refused to meet Prime minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki at an international conference in Sharm al-Sheik, Egypt. King Abdullah abused him for sectarian division (Slackman & Cooper, 2007).

The Saudis were a broken relationship with Iraq during operation “Desert Storm” in 1991 and later in 2004 formally reestablished relations but did not reopen its embassy in Baghdad. While on the other hand, Iraq reopens its embassy in Saudi Arabia in 2007. In the 2010 Iraqi national election, KSA supported the secular leader Dr. Ayad Allawi owing to his friendly relations with Sunni Arabs. During Arab Spring there were several diverging interests between Iraq’s government and Arab states. Iraq also criticized the Saudi and Bahraini governments over the crackdown during Bahraini spring. One of the Iraqi newspapers requested the boycott of Saudi products to protest the Saudi invasion of Bahrain. Moreover, GCC canceled their summit in Baghdad further increasing antagonism between Iraq and GCC members (Zehraa et al., 2018).

Tehran provides full support to Baghdad to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that challenges the writ of the Baghdad government in different parts of Iraq. ISIS started its offensive activities in different parts of Iraq in 2014, intending to establish a new state with its ideology. The then Prime minister of Iraq Nouri al Maliki accused Riyadh of financial support to ISIS. Initially, the US started airstrikes against ISIS later they captured different parts including the Big city of Mosul. Iran played a major role to counter ISIS in Iraq but KSA denied their relation with ISIS. According to Yasin Yavuz, KSA was uncertain about ISIS in Iraq but the common thing was their ideology, as well as ISIS, recommended their followers to teach Saudi designed academic courses in their schools (Yavuz, 2017). Saudi Arabia showed their cooperation with the Iraqi government to counter the threat of Daesh but her primary concern was the growing influence of Iran. ISIS was defeated in Iraq and they lost control of total areas in Iraq (Eriksson, 2019). Saudi Arabia is struggling to maximize its sphere of influence in Iraq to counter Iran in the region.

Yemen

The Republic of Yemen is one of a country on the Southern end of the Arabian Peninsula and it shared borders with Oman and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia shared a 1307 km longest border with Yemen. Historically Yemen is divided into Southern and northern Yemen. Northern Yemen got independence after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and Southern Yemen got independence from the British empire in 1967. The two states formally unified in 1990 and became the Republic of Yemen. Yemen has geostrategic importance owing to its geographical location. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have several different strategic interests in Yemen. The divergence of interest between Riyadh and Tehran over the Republic of Yemen came to the surface after the wave of Arab Spring. Though, there was a border issue between KSA and Yemen that was resolved peacefully (Hiro, 2019).

After the wave of the pro-democracy movement in the Middle East, the Yemeni people also raised their voices for political and economic reforms. Initially, the Gulf states forced the then president Abdullah Saleh to resign and Saudi and her allies installed Mansour Hadi as a new president in Yemen and they peacefully calm the protestors. Later the issue again erupted and the Houthi minority group from Saada province of northern Yemen came to the surface with the slogan of ousting Mansour Hadi from the office. The Houthis captured Sana’a the capital of Yemen in September 2014, and the Yemen crisis started. The neighboring Arab states quickly responded to it but failed to find a peaceful solution to the crisis (Laub & Robinson, 2016).

Mansour Hadi was backed by Saudi Arabia and after some struggle, he flew to KSA. Later Riyadh and other Arab states intervened in the crisis in March 2015, intending to restore the Hadi government and retort Houthis in Yemen. Saudi-led coalition forces targeted Houthis with airstrikes and political unrest converted into a

crisis (Darwich, 2018). Riyadh and Tehran have several differences over the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Saudi accused Iran of supporting Houthis with funding, training, and material aid. One main reason for the Saudi and Yemeni government claim is owing to the religious linkage of Houthis with Iran but Houthis are not a follower of Twelver same like Iranians (Mirza et al., 2021). According to Al-Muslimi (2017) initially Tehran was not in the favor of Houthis but later when they got power and became a major pressure group then Tehran established its relations with Houthis. Interestingly, Tehran's support for Houthis is very small as compared to its support for Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. For Iran, Houthis are the cheapest way to engage KSA in regional issues than to counter by enhancing its military might.

Gulf Area

The Gulf region is further divided into six states that are Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). The political interest of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Gulf states are more vital than in any other region. Besides Iran's policies and different supportive programs, Saudi Arabia has maintained a higher level of political influence in the Gulf region. Saudi Arabia is supporting Gulf monarchs to fulfill its national interest and regional stability. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981 in the era of the Iran-Iraq war. One of the core objectives of GCC was to advance its members for regional security (Terrill, 2011).

In the Gulf region, Iran has failed to gain its political interest. However, Tehran desired to minimize the connection of Gulf monarchs with the West, especially the USA. Though Tehran has no cooperative relationship with Gulf Monarch it has maximum influence with Shiite communities in Gulf. The Gulf states did not have a uniform policy to counter Iran's growing influence in the region since the 1979 revolution. During the

Iran-Iraq war Arab Gulf states openly supported Iraq as well as KSA and Kuwait provide millions of economic and military aids to the Saddam regime. Later the Saddam invasion of Kuwait and lay down their cooperation and support.

According to media reports, several people were arrested by charged with espionage in Kuwait in the 1990s. later Two Irani and a Kuwaiti national were sentenced to death by a Kuwaiti court due to their involvement in spying activities. Kuwait also expelled its diplomatic relations with Iran owing to the issue of espionage (Bianco, 2020). Later, in 2005 and 2010 the MoU and negotiation of LNG failed after a disagreement on technical and price issues. One of the core reasons for the failure of the negotiation was Saudi pressure (Cafiero & Miotto, 2016).

Palestine Issue

Palestine is one of the most prominent issues not only in the Middle East but in the whole world and that unite the two rival Muslim states, Saudi Arabia and Iran since the Islamic revolution. Though Iran had recognized and established good relations with Israel during the Shah regime however after the revolution, Tehran changed its policy and refused to accept Israel (Yavuz, 2017). The Arab-Israel conflict began before the Saudi-Iran rivalry and it continued parallel. Both Tehran and Riyadh used different approaches to resolve the Palestine issue. KSA has strongly supported the Palestinian claim on the Eastern part of Jerusalem and the old city. Saudi Arabia uses scorching rhetoric and endorses a peace plan while Iran funds Hamas and Hezbollah. Iranian stance on the Palestine issue became more rigid after the Islamic revolution of 1979. The revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini refused to accept Israel and challenged its existence. Iran's foreign policy mentioned its support for the oppressed nation of the world (Palestine) with the title of

'Mustazaafeen-e-Jahan. After the revolution, Khomeini replaces the Israeli mission in Tehran with the Palestine embassy (Dehshiri & Majid, 2008). Khomeini also declared the last Friday of every Ramadhan as 'Quds Day' and called the Muslims around the world to show solidarity with Palestine. Later Tehran also established the Quds force led by General Qassim Suleimani (Ghattas, 2021).

The Iranian revolution and Khomeini's support create new hope in Palestinian and they started their fight against Israel with more intensity. Tehran formulated its alliances with Palestinian groups and found allies among the Islamic movement. Iran found Hamas as a key player according to their policies. The success of the Islamic revolution in Iran affected the politics of Palestine and it maximized the desire for jihad among Palestinians. Hamas and other groups started a jihad against Israel under the name of Intifada. Before Washington declared Hamas as a terrorist organization, Riyadh continued to balance relations with both parties of Palestine, Hamas and Fatah. While Saudi Arabia has several reservations about Iran's support for Hamas. In March 2002, Saudi Arabia-led Arab League proposed the 'Arab Peace Initiative' (API) to resolve the Palestine-Israel issue. The API proposed a conditional recognition of Israel in exchange for the returns of all territories captured in the 1967 war. Since the API, Saudi Arabia has been struggling to resolve the issue peacefully (Podeh, 2014). The Arab Spring further strengthen the cooperation between Iran and Hamas while Hamas-KSA relations declined.

According to Alavi and Adib-Moghaddam (2019), Palestine's cause provided Iran a platform to convey its political discourse of resistance and liberation throughout the region. That has given Tehran a surface of influence and power in the region. Moreover, it also enhances Iran's reliability as a leader of 'Ummah'. Irani fiction portrayed Palestine's cause as a yardstick

for calculating the Muslim struggle against global arrogance. There is fluctuation in the policies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia concerning the Palestine cause. Saudi Arabia's support and stance in the Palestine case have shown flexibility since the Arab Spring. The increasing cooperation with the USA also hampered the Saudi stance on Palestine's cause. In February 2014, in an interview regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stated that "it was up to the Palestinians to determine if they were satisfied with the agreement then Tehran would not interfere"(Rozen, 2014). While on the other hand Tehran also showed some kind of flexibility on Palestine's cause before signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. But later Zarif stated that "I believe that this deal will remove a smokescreen [behind] which Israel was standing and hiding its criminal activities against the people of Lebanon and the people of Palestine"(Alavi & Adib-Moghaddam, 2019).

Later in March 2016 during the Fifth Extraordinary OIC Summit in Jakarta Zarif once again disclosed Tehran's continuous support for Palestine's cause against Israel (Alavi, 2017). In the same way during the Sixth International Conference in Support of Palestine Intifada in Tehran on February 22, 2017, Irani President Hassan Rouhani stated that the "people of Iran paid a huge cost for backing Palestinian... they will continue their support" (Osman, 2017). Iran's High Council of Human Rights has written a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in May 2021, to take action on the genocide acts and racial cleansing being committed by Israel (Motamedi, 2021).

Lebanon

Lebanon is another Middle Eastern state where Saudi Arabia and Iran have a diverging interest. The republic of Lebanon came into being after the first World War under a mandate system

under French control. The Lebanese constitution of 1926 divides the political system into three different sects; Maronite (Christen), Shiite, and Sunni. According to the constitution, the President must be from Christen community, the speaker of the parliament must be Shiite and the prime minister must be Sunni. The division was not only limited to the political post but it was extended to the non-political post too. This division dragged the attention of both Riyadh and Tehran in Beirut. Both Riyadh and Tehran have influential power in Beirut and interfere in domestic politics by supporting certain groups (Calabrese, 2020).

Harari government in Lebanon has good relations with the royal family of Saudi Arabia under Prime Minister Rafic Harari but Riyadh failed to maintain its influence owing to Tehran's support to Hezbollah. Lebanon was ruled by Syrian-Hezbollah-Harari cooperation until the emergence of the Shiite-Sunni conflict in 2003. The Iran-Hezbollah nexuses minimized the influence of KSA in Lebanon but the assassination of Rafik Harari in 2005 resulted in a political turmoil in Lebanon that provides an opportunity to KSA to enhance her cooperation with political parties in Lebanon to counter the Iranian influence in Beirut (Saliba, 2017). Since 2005 Saudi Arabia fully supported Saad Harari son of the late Rafik Harari against Hezbollah and Iran's nexuses. Both countries helped Lebanon to end the civil war in 2006 and then in the 2008 conflict, Tehran supported Hezbollah while Riyadh supported the opposing Sunni-led Siniora government (Pasha, Aqeel, & Furqan, 2021).

Tehran is not only curious about the politics of Lebanon since the Islamic revolution but its root was traced before the revolution. Musa al Sadr played a vital role to portrayed Iranian interest in Lebanon. Sadr was born in Iran to a Labdanes father and he returned to Lebanon in 1959 with an Iranian diplomatic passport. In the early 1970s, Sadr gained the highest influence

and achievement within the Shiite community and he played a leading role during the Lebanese civil war that erupted in 1975 (Zisser, 2011). After the Islamic revolution, Tehran played a significant role in the Lebanese civil war and helped Hezbollah a militant organization. Tehran's revolutionary guard provides training and other facilities to Hezbollah Lebanon (Sozer, 2016). Though the Civil war ended with the Taif agreement signed in Saudi Arabia in 1989 Hezbollah emerged as an influential group in Lebanon. Tehran provide a million dollars in aid to assist Hezbollah and they started social services to gain the support of the public.

Tehran invested millions of dollars in Lebanon with the cooperation of Hezbollah. They established educational institutions, hospitals, roads, rehabilitation centers, mosques, water supplies as well as financial institutions to empower the local community (Bakhash, 2019). Despite the militant wing, Hezbollah emerged as a social welfare organization owing to services in the community but the major supporter and policymaker were Tehran. Tehran fully supported Hezbollah during the second Lebanon war in 2006. Hezbollah gained about fifty thousand advanced missiles from Tehran and it has a high degree of accuracy to target Israeli territory. The logic behind weaponized and empowered Hezbollah is to deter Israel and maximized Tehran's influence in the region (Huwaitin, 2015).

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran were supporting their groups to fulfill their strategic interest in Lebanon but in 2017 prime minister Saad Harari resigned owing to Riyadh's pressure. According to (Nakhoul, Bassam, & Perry, 2017) the Saad Harari government failed to counter the growing influence of Iran in Lebanon so the Royal family of KSA forced Saad Harari to resign as well as they wanted to introduce Saad Harari's brother into office. KSA also reduced its financial aid to Lebanon which may further weaken their

cooperation. While on the other hand, Tehran is fully supporting Hezbollah, and Hezbollah also playing a significant role in the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

The region of the Middle East has significant importance in global politics and the two Middle Eastern regional power Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing with each other to gain and protect their strategic interest. The root of their rivalry is centuries back but in the contemporary era, both are trying to protect their interest. The Iranian revolution and later Arab Spring increased the intensity of their competition. Since the Islamic revolution, Riyadh is trying to stop the expansion of Iranian style of revolution and regime change. GCC was established under the umbrella of Saudi Arabia to protect the region of Middle East particularly Gulf states from Iran's influence. KSA and other GCC states supported Saddam Hussain regime during Iran-Iraq war and also initiated several policies to eradicate the pro-Iran movements. Riyadh also established good relations with Washington to balance the regional power. While, Iran supported different pressure groups especially non-state actors to enhance her sphere of influence.

The US intervention and ousted of Saddam Hussain from Iraq provide an opportunity for Iran to enhance its strategic influence in the whole region particularly in Iraq and peripheral areas. The declined of Saddam regime created a power vacuum in Middle East that was filled by Iran. Later, the Arab Spring proved fruitful for Iran to increased its sphere of influence and she tried her best to secure her political interest in Middle East but maximum policies of Tehran was rhetorical. While, Saudi Arabia's policy was offensive and she not only supported effected governments and directly intervene in Bahrain and Yemen to calm down the protestors. KSA, successfully protect the Khalifa government in Bahrain but her policy

failed in Yemen. Owing to the failure of US and KSA led 'Yemen Plan' and political transition pushed Yemen in worst crisis. Both states are supporting different non-state actors and governments in Middle East to secure and gained their political interest while both are using ideology as toll to increase their sphere of influence.

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