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Structural Sources of Saudi–Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a strenuous competition in the Middle East to protect and promote their respective spheres of influence, to each other's detriment. This qualitative study traces the structural sources of this competition while taking cue from the history. It argues that demise of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's plunging into civil war, and Arab Spring leading to violent movements in Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen accentuated Saudi–Iran competition in the region. Study finds that the sources of their rivalry lie at structural level and can be understood by focusing upon their aspiration for the Muslim world leadership, religio-sectarianism, antithetical governance structure, and Iranian nuclear program.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Iran, Middle East, sphere of influence, proxy warfare, sectarianism, Iranian nuclear program

Introduction

Middle Eastern politics has transfused into bloc politics where two states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are competing to protect and expand their respective spheres of influence. This political competition was accentuated by the Iranian revolution of 1979, which gave it a sectarian dimension. Demise of Saddam Hussein furthered their religio-political rivalry which now has become geostrategic in nature. Arab spring and its attendant manifestations altogether changed the environment of the Middle East. Conflicts in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria created incentives for the two regional powers to expand their respective spheres of influence at the cost of the adversary. Their policies are consequential in determining the political contours of the Middle East.

Along with geopolitical and geostrategic competition, the sectarian and ideological differences have made this rivalry complex in nature, having far reaching consequences for them, the region, and for the Muslim world as a whole. Fall of the Saddam regime in Iraq forced the regional states to reconfigure the existing distribution of power and also to renegotiate terms of the engagement with the extra-regional states (Wehrey et al., 2009, p. ix). Although Saddam's Iraq was not having cordial relations with Saudi Arabia, yet regionally it acted as a "counter-weight" to Iran (Marcus, 2019). Saudi Arabia, at least, was content with the Saddam regime's keeping Iraq's majority Shi'ite population at bay,

but with its fall, Shi'ite groups dominated the new governmental structure—a recipe for rising Iranian sphere of influence, and a source for Saudi anxiety (Erickson, 2017).

Arab Spring brought structural reforms in several states of the Middle East. Change of governments in Tunisia and Egypt and crises in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria degenerated Middle Eastern hierarchical structures, resulting into a power vacuum that was immediately exploited by Iran and Saudi Arabia to enhance their influence. Bahrain's Shi'ite population was supported by Iran, while its central government was supported militarily by Saudi Arabia; Houthis, with the help of Iran, overthrew the government in Yemen, while Saudi Arabia started a military campaign to restore the central government. Saudi Arabia started supporting rebels revolting against President Bashar-al-Assad as soon as the movement started, while Iran threw its weight behind the central government. Saudi Arabia pressurized Lebanese prime minister to resign, where Iran's supported Hezbollah enjoys tremendous influence. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's allies in the Middle East,

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United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, have developed diplomatic relations with Israel, a state whom Iran considered as one of its biggest enemies in the region. The resulting power competition between the two furthered traditional animosities in the Middle East. Their animosity has not only stata, regional, and systemic implication, but also domestic implication in which respective societies have been acculturated into developing binaries of us versus them. This acculturation has even helped the states to develop societal identities where the “other” is seen as hostile and alien bent upon destruction of the “us.” While building upon this competitive phenomenon, this qualitative study addresses the question that what are the structural sources of Saudi–Iran rivalry in the Middle East? Why has it accentuated since the fall of the Saddam regime, and how is this rivalry impacting the region and the world, specifically the Muslim world? The study hypothesizes that sectarianism has provided rationale to Saudi Arabia and Iran for the expansion of their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East and achieve their politico-historical objective of regional dominance and economic objective of enhanced control over natural resources.

Conceptual Framework

This study is conducted using the conceptual framework developed by Susanna Hast who published *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics* in 2014. She notes that sphere of influence cannot be explained or defined without taking into account international order, justice, and systemic configurations (Hast, 2014, pp. 139–142). States trying to establish, protect, and expand sphere of influence pursue policies which challenge adversaries in almost every arena of state’s lives—political, economic, military, and/or cultural. A sphere of influence is a region dominated by a power having “high penetration” with the objective of excluding rival powers’ influence (Hast, 2014, pp. 7–8; Kaufman, 1976, p. 11). Having support of the states inhabiting the region consolidates position of the dominating power. Rival powers, on the other hand, continue to sow the seeds of discord by alluring inhabiting states through economic incentives or by fomenting dissenting voices or rebellious movements to weaken the dominant power’s influence. Keal (1983), on the other hand, defines it as “a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it” (p. 15). This definition identifies another important feature of the sphere of influence which is to establish a quasi-control over the policies of the states of the region by the predominant state, thus restraining their sovereignty (Hast, 2014, pp. 7–8). Saudi Arabia and Iran traditionally have their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East and Gulf regions. While there are certain states where they have been competing with each other such as Lebanon, yet most of the region’s geopolitical allegiances were quasi-defined. Arab

Spring has disturbed this status quo resulting into a situation where both Saudi Arabia and Iran are bent upon expanding their spheres of influence at the cost of others. In order to expand, they have shown willingness to go to any length as is evident from the sudden resignation by the Lebanese prime minister when he was on a visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Staff, 2017), and Iranian supply of sophisticated weaponry and training to Houthis in Yemen (Nadimi, 2020).

Structural Sources of Saudi–Iran Rivalry

Hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been institutionalized structurally because of the repetitive processes of the history. This hostility has now become part of their state and institutional structures and is influencing their respective spheres of influence and shaping contours of the regional and at times extra-regional politics. Their competition for the leadership of the Muslim world, competing visions of the regional order, Iranian nuclear program and Saudi apprehensions about it, support to regional allies, oil pricing issues and access / control over natural resources, different and antithetical state and governance structures, systemic-level affiliations with the opposing and at time belligerent great powers, presence of sectarian and ethnic fissures within societies of both the states, and accusations against each other of fomenting rebellious behavior are only few of the issues that have provided fodder to their hostility.

Sectarian Antagonism and Appeal in the Muslim World

History has shaped the nature of antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Historical analysis of the relations provides guidance about the patterns of interaction that “how and in what manner they act and react” (Arnold & Wiener, 2012; Hensel, 1999). Iran and Saudi Arabia have always considered themselves to be a model of the real Islamic state (S. H. Nasr, 2000). On the basis of this claim, they have always vied for the regional and global influence in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia, a follower of the Sunni Islam, has always tried to influence the Sunni Muslims, while Iran, a follower of Shi’ite Islam, has tremendous appeal among the Shi’ite Muslims throughout the world. Figures 1 and 2 represent the estimated Sunni and Shi’ite populations in the Middle East. Shi’ite Muslims are in majority in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, and there exists considerable Shi’ite populations in Lebanon, Yemen, and Kuwait. Sunni Muslims are in majority in most of the other Middle Eastern states. Iran is home to more than a third of the world’s Shi’ite population, that is, about 37% to 40%; while they make up to 90% to 95% of its total population (Pew, 2009).

Iran, since the 1979 revolution, has tried to entice the Shi’ite populations of the Middle East to revolt against their

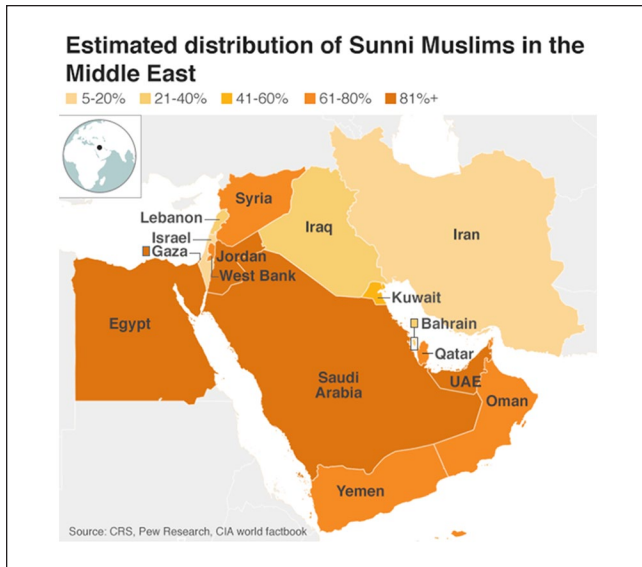


Figure 1. Estimated Sunni Muslims in the Middle East (Marcus, 2019).

monarchical rulers. “Iran’s first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, backed Shi’ite militias and parties abroad” (Erickson, 2017). Saudi Arabia also established its own alliances—which are predominantly Sunni—in the form of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, 2020) and Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (Winter, 2017), of which Iran was deliberately kept out.

Antithetical Governance Structures and Custodianship of the Holy Places

Al-Saud family holds the custodianship of the Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, a prestigious position always challenged by Iran who claims that this custodianship should be jointly managed by a “multilateral consortium” consisting of Muslims throughout the world (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2021). Al-Saud family considers that this position has helped them in building the Saudi state and society (Wehrey et al., 2009, pp. ix–x). It has also helped them in managing the annual pilgrimages, involving millions of Muslim, in an *effective* manner (The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020; Taibah & Arlikatti, 2015). This position of custodians of the Holy sites provides Saudi Arabia an inexorable influence in the Muslim world. Iran, while having its own regional aspirations of becoming leader of the Muslim world, has long debated this issue and challenged this position of Saudi Arabia at different fora—implying it is more of a political issue than a religious one. Erickson notes,

Sectarianism has certainly informed the foreign policy priorities of Iran and Saudi Arabia . . . But this isn’t simply, or even primarily, a religious struggle. It’s a political and economic one,



Figure 2. Estimated Shia Muslims in the Middle East (Poole, 2016).

a struggle for control of resources and dominance in a politically fraught region. (Erickson, 2017)

Another important point of departure between the two states remains their antithetical state and governance structures. The 1979 revolution overthrew authoritarian rule of Shah of Iran and established theocracy enmeshed with the elements of democracy (Dabashi, 2006; Erdbrink, 2019; Sheikh, 2012). Iran since 1979 revolution is a quasi-democracy—based upon a hybrid constitution—where Supreme Leader has the ultimate authority (Bruno, 2008), while President is elected who also enjoys substantial power, yet he has to take consent of the Supreme Leader for every major decision (Abdo, 2013). Saudi Arabia presented this revolution negatively throughout the world and “claim[ed] that Shiites were not true Muslims” (V. Nasr, 2007, p. 187).

Revolutionary ideology of Iran is against the kind of regimes and political structures predominant in the Middle East, which are mostly authoritarian monarchies in nature. Using it as a point, Iran has been quite successful in instigating unrest in some Arab states (Wehrey et al., 2009, pp. ix–x). So proxies in opposing spheres of influence are enticed and attracted using sectarian and ideological means to achieve the objectives which remained political in nature.

Strategic Competition Since Saddam’s Demise: Battle for Baghdad

The strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has emerged since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The United States held secret diplomatic-level discussions with Iran before launching attack against Iraq in 2003. Zalmay Khalilzad notes that the United States was able to get assurance from Iran that it will not fire upon American planes if they

accidentally flew over Iranian territory. It is interesting to note that United States also requested Iran to help use its influence over Shi'ite groups in Iraq to form a government after Saddam Hussein (Zalmay Khalilzad, quoted by Gordon, 2016). The demise of Saddam Hussein created a power vacuum over which a fierce competition immediately ensued within Iraq and at the regional level, resulting into a civil war like situation. Majority Shi'ite population of Iraq not only celebrated the demise of Saddam regime (Rieff, 2004), but also actively engaged in the new political process. Saudi Arabia, though no friend of Saddam Hussein, feared that after his demise Iraq will ultimately turn into an Iranian proxy, and will overall result in the reconfiguration of the "regional order" (Scahill & Hussain, 2019). With the demise of Saddam Hussein, who presented himself as a secular Arab nationalist, balance of power shifted in favor of Iran.

Iran remains one of the biggest beneficiaries of the regime change in Iraq. Demise of a person, who had challenged its territorial and ideological boundaries, resulted in a friendly government on the Iranian border, which ultimately resulted in the expansion of its sphere of influence. Commentators accused Saudis of supporting several Sunni groups fighting against the new Iraqi government and the United States. But with the passage of time Saudi Arabia realized that the best way to deal with the competition in Iraq is to play carefully without crossing the red-line—expecting Iraq to get out of Iran's influence. By around 2015, Iraqi national pride started to re-emerge (Crisis Group, 2018), and that is exactly which Saudi Arabia tried to exploit. Saudi Arabia re-opened its embassy in Baghdad in 2016, which was closed down in 1990 in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (Bayoumy, 2015; "Saudi Arabia Opens New Baghdad Consulate and Pledges \$1bn in Loans for Iraq," 2019). Since 2016, it has tried to develop cordiality in its relations with Iraq. The 2018/19 protests in Iraq and the impression that the government has become proxy of Iran led to violent clashes in which Iranian interests were damaged by the protestors. In 2019, protestors even burnt down Iran's Consulate in Najaf (Rubin & Hassan, 2019). These are some of the welcome signs for Saudi Arabia, who has maintained the objective of according help in rebuilding a post-ISIS Iraq. It, in fact, is exploiting a heightened nationalistic fervor in Iraq and trying to make inroads in an Iranian sphere of influence. Saudi Arabia knows that getting Iraq out of the Iranian sphere of influence may not be possible at the moment yet developing mistrust and fanning intra-Shi'ite differences—between Iran and Iraq—would be a success story. But again, this will remain a herculean task because Iraq is house of the Shi'ite holy shrines, especially in Najaf and Karbala, a source for attraction for not only Iranian but Shi'ite community throughout the world (Khan, 2014). Moreover, Iran still is one of the biggest supporters of the Iraqi government, considering it one of the greatest strategic asset to protect and promote its interests in the Middle East (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2019).

Proxy Competition Since the Arab Spring: A Case of Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria

During and after the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and Iran have often supported the opposing groups in the affected states that has ushered in a wave of unrest in the Middle East and disturbed its configuration of power.

The movement, started by self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, led to the overthrow of governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Regime change in Libya was brought with the help of the international community. Furthermore, Syria and Yemen descended into civil wars and Bahrain suppressed the movement. Not only states, but several non-state actors, such as Al-Qaeda, also benefited from the movement (Mirza et al., 2021). The objective to enhance their respective spheres of influence in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain—three case studies for this part of the paper—engendered a strategic competition in which both Saudi Arabia and Iran have established and promoted their proxies. They have armed the rebels or the government, funded opposition groups, and started proxy wars through their affiliated groups. While Saudi Arabia has created problems for Iran's supported states and non-state actors in the region, Iran welcomed the revolts in the Arab states. This is evident from Khamenei's statement who noted that "uprisings in Arab countries is an indication of an 'Islamic awakening' reminiscent of the 1979 Iranian Revolution" (Khamenei, 2011). Iranian leadership even named the process of toppling Arab governments as a liberating Islamic movement (Lutz, 2011). Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, visualized these movements with skepticism. It is important to note here that Saudi Arabia and Iran supported movements only in those states which fall under the rival's sphere of influence and opposed the ones transpiring in their own sphere of influence.

Battle for the Soul of Bahrain

Bahrain has a total population of about 1.6 millions (Ministry of Information Affairs, 2020), of which Shi'ite community is in majority constituting about 65% to 75% of the population (Pew, 2009). Iran considered it a state that naturally should have fallen under its sphere of influence, but is ruled by a Sunni dynasty. Iran, thus, has developed proxies in Bahrain and tried several times to overthrow its government (Jones, 2019). With the supporting statements pouring in from Iran in favor of the "Islamic awakening," opposition groups in Bahrain started to protest on February 14, 2011. Their demands included more freedoms, reforms, free and fair elections, and release of prisoners. Movement soon spread throughout Bahrain, turning into an uprising against the regime, a formidable challenge for neighboring Saudi Arabia which feared that it may have spillover effect in its own resource rich Eastern Province where Shi'ite community is in considerable number—Shi'ites make around 10% to 15%

of Saudi population amounting to around 2 to 4 millions in number (Pew, 2009). Hence, Saudi Arabia reacted in a quick and profound way. In the beginning, it manipulated the sentiments of the Sunni population of Bahrain against the uprisings, and then, invoking a GCC security clause, intervened militarily. Saudi objectives in Bahrain revolved around maintaining the status quo, ensuring survival of a friendly regime, and suppressing the uprising. So a proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia that had been ongoing in the background, in Bahrain, came to the forefront (Knights & Levitt, 2018; Slackman, 2011).

Bahrain, being an island state in the Persian Gulf, has a crucially important geostrategic position—close to Saudi border. Abdulrazaq (2011) notes,

If Iran were to empower the Shi'ite sect to dominate society and politics, Iran . . . would be in a position to have a commanding presence over the Arabian Gulf and also be provided with opportunities to threaten the oil shipment of other rich oil states.

Iran, thus, continued to support the uprising and condemned the Bahrain and Saudi actions against the protestors. Ayatollah Khamenei denied Saudi and Bahraini allegations of interference and notes, “The ruler of the island of Bahrain says that Iran interferes in their internal affairs; this is a lie. If we had interfered, the conditions would have been different in Bahrain” (Qaidaari, 2015). The presence of Saudi forces in Bahrain meant problems for Iranian supported Shi'ite groups (Mabon, 2012). Ultimately, the episode helped in further strengthening hate toward “the other” and strained already hostile environment between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Yemen Crisis, Iranian Intransigence, and Saudi Fears

Massive uprisings in Yemen led to the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, who was clinging with the power since 1990 Yemen's unification. While Abdu-Rabbu Mansour took the reins of the government, Houthis in the Northern Yemen started a rebellion. Since the uprising, they have become a well-organized and -equipped militia of Yemen. In 2015, they were able to seize the capital and Abdu-Rabbu Mansour fled to Saudi Arabia (Al-Batati, 2015; Reardon, 2015). Since then, a civil war is in the offing in Yemen.

Houthis belong to Shi'ite sect of Islam and it is believed that they are trained and equipped by Iran's Revolutionary Guard (IRG) (Strobel & Hosenball, 2015). On the request of the ousted President Mansour, a Saudi Arabia led coalition started military campaign against the Houthis, ultimately dividing the state into pro-Houthi and pro-Mansour forces, supported by Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively. This proxy competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has aggravated the suffering of the common Yemeni population about half of which is facing “pre-famine condition” (United Nations, 2018).

Strategically an Iranian friendly government will give it access to the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea, a position from where Iran will be able to sandwich Saudi Arabia—Iranian supported Iraq and Syria in the North, and Yemen in the South. Saudi Arabia, considering it an existential threat to the security and survival, launched the offensive. Houthis have been firing several missiles capable of hitting major Saudi cities, often shot down by its defenses (Said, 2020). This proxy war, if continued for some time, has a potential of bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran face to face with each other. In a hypothetical situation, what if missiles fired by Houthis hit some major Saudi cities and installations. What if these missiles may cause irreparable damage to the level that Saudis feel compelled to respond proactively not only against the Yemeni targets, but also against the state sponsoring them. The crisis has a potential of getting out of control and can escalate to serious levels.

Proxy War in Syria

Regional power competition and sectarian aspects of the civil war are the most prominent sources of the conflict in Syria where Arab Spring triggered a movement against the Assad regime. Initially, demonstrations were relatively peaceful, but the regime cracked down and caused human rights violations that furthered the cause of the movement throughout Syria. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, Turkey, and several other states supported the movement with the objective of overthrowing Assad regime (Demir & Rijnoveann, 2013). Uprisings paved the way for the right-wing religious groups and parties to influence the movement, ultimately giving rise to ISIS (Mirza et al., 2021). On the other hand, Syria remained the “primary hub in Iran's power projection in the Levant” (Sullivan, 2014). It has even played the role of facilitator and coordinator of its links with Lebanon based Hezbollah. Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah have been regarded as the “Axis of Resistance” against Israel and other competing regional states in the Levant (Sullivan, 2014). Fall of the Assad regime would have meant constraining Iranian influence over Hezbollah and even Lebanon because of the loss of the main link in the chain. Without Assad's loyalty and his ability to remain in power, the second line of Iran's defense would have crumbled (Abdo, 2011). To ensure the survival of Assad regime, Iran sent its military commanders such as General Qassem Suleimani to provide training and assistance to Syria. Several Iranian high ranking officials died during the fighting in Syria such as General Hamadani, Brigadier-General Mohammad Allahdadi, Major-General Hadi Kajbaf, and Brigadier-General Reza Khavari (IISS, 2019). By the end of 2014, Iran was strategically and deeply submerged in the Syrian conflict which it could not afford losing. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds Force (IRGC-QF)—responsible for its foreign operations—not only intervened in the Syrian crisis by sending thousands of Iranians, but also recruited and trained Shi'ites

from other states to help the fight in Syria, such as, Liwa Zaynabiyoun recruited Pakistani Shias, and Liwa Fatimiyoun consisted of Afghan Shia community (Ghaddar, 2018, pp. 1–2; Zahid, 2016). In addition to training and manpower assistance, Iran also provided the latest telecommunication and intelligence monitoring technologies to Syria (Warrick, 2011).

From the very start of the uprising, Saudi Arabia supported protestors and condemned the actions of the Assad regime. Then King Abdullah noted that President Assad should “stop the killing machine” (Berti & Guzansky, 2012, p. 1). It even removed Syrian ambassador to lodge protest against the policies of the Assad regime (Hegghammer & Zelin, 2013). Soon military aid started flowing for the rebels that resulted in some substantial tactical victories for them. Major part of the funding and equipment was channeled through Jordan. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia also provided ideological support to the rebels’ cause. *Fatwas* were issued by Saudi and other Muftis in favor of *jihad* against the Assad regime, thus legitimizing the rebellion (Black, 2013). As Iran has been injecting Shi’ite foreign fighters into Syrian war—numbering around 8,000 in 2014 in favor of Assad regime—Sunni foreign fighters, with the help of Saudi Arabia also started pouring in, to fight against the regime (totaling around 7000 in 2014) (Booth, 2014). Presumed victory of Bashar-al-Assad, and his allied forces, against Daesh and rebel forces secured the long-term strategic interest of Iran in Syria, with Saudi Arabia seems to be at the losing end. Saudi Arabia, recently, has shown signs that it may pursue rapprochement with Syria ostensibly to signal its displeasure with the American policies vis-à-vis Iranian nuclear program (*The Arab Weekly*, 2021).

Iran’s Nuclear Program and Arab Rapprochement With Israel

Development of the nuclear program by Iran is perceived as a direct threat to the Saudi security and interests in the Middle East. The 2010s did not bid well for Saudi Arabia because initially it lost some of its allies because of the Arab Spring and Iranian interventions, and then P5+1 (5 UNSC permanent member—the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, China—and Germany) signed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. Saudi Arabia showed its resentment for the deal at every forum maintaining that the agreement does not prevent Iran from its pursuit of the nuclear program. Furthermore, it will help Iran economically because its rogue state status is revoked, and sanctions are eased down. Resultantly, its sphere of influence in the Middle East and beyond will increase exponentially, with the ultimate objective of becoming a predominant power of the region (Pasha, 2016; Riedel, 2016). Saudis also resented that GCC members could have been made a part of the negotiations, so as to alleviate their concerns. “Wisdom has it that if you do not have enough cards on the negotiating table, you may not get everything you

want, but if you are not even present, you will certainly get nothing” (Bin Ghaith et al., 2015).

Iran has always tried to have high oil prices because that is one of its biggest sources of income. Saudis, on the other hand, have tried to maintain a moderate price for the oil, to realize two objectives; long-term sustainability of the supply of natural resources, and to cause economic damage to Iran (Wehrey et al., 2009, pp. ix–x). Saudis have shown apprehensions that Iran has been successful in enhancing its asymmetric power since the fall of Saddam Hussein, and that it must be challenged. Iran, on its part, considers Saudi Arabia an American proxy and a hindrance in its regional ambitions of achieving a predominant position.

Election of Donald Trump in 2016 and his withdrawal from the JCPOA revived the hopes of Saudi Arabia, which finally found a president in the United States who they believed could stand against the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East. Saudis reiterated “the need to deal with the danger that Iran’s policies pose to international peace and security through a comprehensive view that is not limited to its nuclear program but also includes all hostile activities” (Staff, 2018). Saudi proposed rapprochement with Israel is a direct consequence of its threat perception vis-à-vis Iran. UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, the states falling in the Saudi sphere of influence, established diplomatic relations with Israel, a staunch opponent of Iran, who had been advocating a military action against Iranian nuclear installation (“Explainer: Where Do Arab States Stand on Normalising Israel Ties?,” 2020). “Enemy of my enemy is my friend” dictum worked here. Israel maintains one of the strongest militaries in the Middle East and has also the capability and “will” to confront and if required strike Iran, through all possible means. Examples of the Israeli resolve against Iran involve the cyberattack against Iranian nuclear installations with a virus named “Stuxnet” (Farwell & Rohozinski, 2011), killing of the top Iranian nuclear scientist, again, allegedly by Israel, and recent electricity blackout at Natanz nuclear plant, which Iran claimed is an act of nuclear terrorism. Iranian sources and international experts opine that these sophisticated attacks are indeed planned and executed by Israel (Associated Press, 2021; *BBC*, 2020).

Conclusion

Last two decades have seen the Iranian successful strategy to protect and expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East—in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This has exacerbated the Saudi’ desperation, who has adopted a proactive policy to counter Iranian moves in the region. This article argues that sectarian dimension provides a reductionist explanation for this competition, which in fact is more political in nature, than ideological. Their competition has been accentuated since the fall of the Saddam regime which disturbed the status quo in the region. Process was further reinforced by the Arab Spring which paved the way for Iran and Saudi Arabia to protect and expand their influence, especially in Yemen,

Syria, and Bahrain. Iranian nuclear program provided another irritant that prompted some Arab states to adopt out-of-the-box approach and go for the policy decisions, which could have not been possible in the pre-2003 era—they are going for rapprochement with Israel. This Arab rapprochement with Israel is a direct consequence of the Iranian growing sphere of influence and threat that it poses to the Saudi interests in the region and beyond. Saudi Foreign Minister hinted at normalization of relation with Israel with the hope that “it would be extremely helpful economically, socially and from a *security* perspective (emphasis added)” (Bin Farhan, 2021). Saudi Arabia and Iran are now fighting through their proxies established throughout the Middle East. They are supporting rebels and dissident in each other sphere of influence with light and heavy weapons, financial assistance, training, intelligence equipment, strategic guidance, planning advice (Saab, 2015), and/or religious-sectarian *fatwas* for the legitimization of fighting. Their competition has repercussions that are not only limited to the Middle East but encompass the whole Muslim world. For example, it has given rise to horizontal and vertical proliferation of the conflicts, sectarianism, rise of hyper-terrorist organizations (*Daesh* or ISIS, for example), and most importantly the humanitarian crisis that is influencing even the European states by the increased flow of the migrants. So far, Saudi Arabia and Iran have fought each other by supporting their relative proxies in each other’s spheres of influence—a competition named as a “cold war” (Wehrey et al., 2009, pp. ix–x)—yet the chances of a direct confrontation cannot be ruled out, especially with the increasing capability of Houthis to target major Saudi cities, and Iranian continued persistence of pursuing the nuclear program if the nuclear deal with the United States is not formalized. Such a situation will not bid well for the Middle East and the world as a whole.

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