



## SAUDI-IRAN RIVALRY AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL POLITICS

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### **Abstract:**

Historically, Iran has dominated the regional politics in several aspects, but after the Second World War, Saudi Arabia emerged as a significant player in regional politics. Both states have several differences; Saudi Arabia is Sunni dominated state with monarchical system of governance while Iran has a Shia dominated population and Islamic republic nature of governance. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in a conflict with each other for several decades and there have been a number of issues that have intensified the Saudi-Iran rivalry for the several decades and created instability in the region. Iranian nuclear programme and capital punishment of Shia cleric by Saudi government have also further increased their rivalry. But, their recent enmity has had a drastic impact on the West Asian region. Therefore, regional conflicts have been becoming very complex and affecting the regional politics as well as international politics. The main aim of this paper is to examine the causes of Saudi-Iran rivalry and how does it impact on regional politics.

**Keywords:** regional politics, rivalry, conflict, instability

### **1. Introduction**

In the West Asian region, Saudi Arabia and Iran have occupied important positions. The West Asian region is also known as the birth place of three major religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>ii</sup> *"History of the region designated the terms Near-*

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<sup>ii</sup> Muhammad Rizwan, Muhammad Arshid, Muhammad Waqar, Saira Iram, "From Rivalry to Nowhere: A Story of Iran-Saudi Ties," *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, Vol. 19, no. 9 (2014):92.

*East and Middle-East, referring two different regions. The Near East representing the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, while the Middle East covered Iran, Afghanistan, Turkestan and the Caucasus.*"<sup>iii</sup> After the First World War ended in 1918, the term Middle East became popular and gained acceptance and East, Eurocentric and West Asian region began to be referred by this term. The region had historically attracted travelers, intruders, and business men etc., given its geographic location and topography, alike. In the present time, the same region has become a hub of international politics and interventions, especially for the US. The boundaries of the region have been redefined and the animosity has escalated with each passing day. As the world was about to enter in to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Middle East began to be referred as "Greater Middle East," comprising mostly Muslim nations of North Africa, Western Asia and Central Asia. But this term was not used commonly.<sup>iv</sup>

Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two most powerful countries in the Middle Eastern region and have been so since the Second World War ended. Both have had a say in the regional politics and have tried to dominate it. Saudi Arabia since its inception has had a monarchical system of governance. The supreme authority of the country is its King and the council of ministers is appointed by him. Freedom of expression and speech is limited to the extent where it does not collide with the doctrines it has set. Iran, on the other hand, was ruled by a dictator until the success of the Islamic revolution of 1979, whose overthrow paved way for another theocracy, however, with a twinge of democracy as the leader of the country is chosen via elections. However, the supreme leader of the country known as the Ayatollah is the highest authority in the country and can't be challenged. Freedom of speech and expression in Iran is also limited to the same extent where it does not clash with the guidelines set by the State. Nonetheless, both the states have been engaged in a conflict to dominate the region. The equation between the states changed particularly after Islamic revolution in Iran.

## **2. Roots of Saudi-Iran Rivalry**

The Iranian revolution led to the overthrow of a pro-western government bringing the revolutionaries to power. They were further propagating the need to export the revolution which threatened the other neighbouring sheikhdoms, in particular Saudi Arabia. *"Tehran began backing Shia militias and parties abroad, and Riyadh - concerned at the growing influence of a newly-strident Iran - strengthened links to other Sunni governments,*

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<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>iv</sup> Middle East, "Land (Scholastic.Com)", accessed on, 12-02-2017, available at: [www.Scholastic.com/teachers/article/middle-east-land](http://www.Scholastic.com/teachers/article/middle-east-land)

*including the formation of the Gulf Co-operation Council.”<sup>v</sup> During the 1980’s, tensions between Saudi and Iran escalated and “Saudi Arabia backed Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and after clashes at the hajj in 1987 killed hundreds of Iranian pilgrims, Saudi Arabia suspended diplomatic ties for three years. Another key milestone was the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, when the overthrow of Saddam Hussein saw a Shia-led government come to power in Riyadh’s neighbour. The Arab Spring saw Iran support its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with the Saudis backing the opposition when popular protests turned into civil war.”<sup>vi</sup> Nevertheless, the clash of ideologies along with different sectarian affiliations led to division between the two, although, they had managed to overcome their differences after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, however, the civilian uprising again changed the equation between the two impacting the regional politics heavily.*

The enmity between the two reached to its zenith after Iran relentlessly worked towards the exportation of its indigenous revolution to its neighbouring countries. Iran-Iraq war was one such instance where the two countries had come head to head, though, indirectly. Iran was engaged in a direct confrontation with Iraq and the later was receiving all the necessary help from Saudi Arabia. Although, the war ended in a stalemate, however, it took a while for both the countries to mend their fences with each other.

A positive change began to be witnessed when in August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and Saudi and Iran both found themselves on the same platform of condemning the Iraqi aggression. A little later, diplomatic channels opened between them and soon highest state officials began paying visits to each other’s country. Nevertheless, the relations between the two again started to change when the US invaded Iraq, which saw the country’s Shia majority coming to power. Iran began to exploit the opportunity and in a very less time, Iran created hegemony over Iraq.

Iran’s intervention in Iraq did not go unnoticed in Saudi Arabia. And when the US withdrew from Iraq, the sectarian animosity became increasingly intense. *“In subsequent years, two fundamental regional shifts had a cascading effect on overall Saudi-Iran relations: the U.S. war on terrorism following the 9/11 attacks, and the Arab uprisings in 2011.”<sup>vii</sup> It had resulted in two major changes in the Middle East in which “the former removed Iraq as a major power in the Middle East, the latter destabilized Syria and Egypt – two*

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<sup>v</sup> Thom Poole, “Iran and Saudi Arabia’s great rivalry explained,” *BBC News*, January 4, 2016, accessed on February 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35221569>

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Helia Ighani, “Managing the Saudi-Iran Rivalry,” *Council on Foreign Relations: Center for Preventive Action*, October 25, 2016, accessed on February 3, 2017, retrieved from

[http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Workshop\\_Report\\_CPA\\_Saudi\\_Iran\\_Rivalry\\_OR.pdf](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Workshop_Report_CPA_Saudi_Iran_Rivalry_OR.pdf)

*historical Arab stalwarts....the elimination of these three major regional powers intensified the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.”*<sup>viii</sup> Nevertheless, the war in Syria proved to be the most important factor which intensified the rivalry between the two to such a level from where there seems to be no reversion.

### 3. Iran and Saudi after the Syrian Uprising

Tensions between the two countries escalated further as the war in Syria intensified endangering a region that had already been a hotbed of animosities for decades. And as the war acquired the shape of sectarian violence, an escalating competition for influence and dominance of the Middle East began. *“That rivalry goes far beyond just words, with both countries backing militant groups and proxy forces throughout the region, particularly in Syria. Their competition is a major driver of conflict in the Middle East, including the growing violence along Sunni-Shia lines.”*<sup>ix</sup>

Saudi began to support the rebels against Bashar al-Assad. Iran, on the other hand, involved itself directly in the Syrian war and sent its armies to fight against what it thought was aggression and terrorism. Soon different organizations in-behalf of Bashar participated in the war supported by Iran. Bashar had been emerging victorious in Syria with Iranian help. This started to set alarm bells ringing in Saudi circles. Furthermore, the rise of ISIS was a major setback for the Saudi’s as there were allegations that Saudi had been channelizing money to the most vicious terrorist organization. This further strengthened the Iranian position internationally as it waged a war against the organization while fighting against the Syrian rebels at the same time.

Furthermore, Iran had been reeling under severe sanctions, which had crippled its economy, slapped against it after Iran failed to come to common terms with the west soon after the success of Islamic revolution. Their fight against ISIS terrorists helped their image to improve and their stature began to internationally. This culminated in the signing of nuclear deal with the US which was something highly unthinkable of a few years back and *“crippling economic sanctions on Iran ... [were] lifted.”*<sup>x</sup> The nuclear deal paved way for *“Washington and Tehran to de-conflict their interests in the region.”*<sup>xi</sup> It

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<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Max Fisher, “The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that's tearing apart the Middle East, explained,” *Vox News*, January 4, 2016, accessed January 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war>

<sup>x</sup> BBC News, “Iran nuclear deal: Key details,” *BBC News*, January 16, 2016, accessed on February 3, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>

<sup>xi</sup> Navid Hassibi, “The Top 5 Reasons to Sign a Nuclear Deal with Iran,” *The National Interest*, November 20, 2014, accessed on February 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-top-5-reasons-sign-nuclear-deal-iran-11705>

was further speculated that “could pave the way for the broader de-conflicting of regional interests, which could in turn lead to a form of sustained détente between the two.”<sup>xii</sup>

Additionally,

*“Iranian negotiators understood well what’s been driving the U.S. president, and they have used the prospect of becoming “a friend” as their best bargaining card. For over a year now in small private conversations and strolls, they have been painting rosy pictures of Iranian-American cooperation. The Iranian list of possibilities goes to most of Washington’s principal worries about the broad Middle East. They would step up their fighting alongside Iraqi troops to combat the so-called Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) in central Iraq. And they would do much more in Syria to go after the headquarters and main forces that ISIS has there. They spoke of finding “solutions” to the civil war in Yemen between Sunnis and Iran-backed Shiites. They raised hopes of forging better relations with America’s “partners” in the Gulf. They pressed the idea of renewing the cooperation they once had with the U.S. fighting the Taliban at the beginning of the Afghan war”.*<sup>xiii</sup>

These developments in began to be seen as threatening developments by the Saudi’s. “A nuclear deal with Tehran, from the Saudi perspective, means two things: Iran will have the ability to improve its economic standing, and the capability to create a nuclear weapon - since the deal will only take effect for a relatively short period of time, 15 years, and will not destroy Iran’s technical capabilities to maintain a nuclear programme. Both results would strengthen Iran and its allies in the region.”<sup>xiv</sup> On the issue of nuclear deal, additionally, Saudi was left friendless.

*“The Saudis have no allies in American politics to rally against the Obama Administration, and no desire to set themselves against the other international powers who signed the agreement, including their security partners France and Great Britain, their fellow oil producer Russia, and their major oil customer China. . . . [Saudi’s] have a more profound fear: that geopolitical trends in the Middle East are aligning against them, threatening both their regional stature and their domestic security. The Saudis see an*

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<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, “The Real Reason Obama Did the Iran Deal,” *The Daily Beast*, July 14, 2015, accessed on February 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/14/the-iran-deal-s-missing-ingredient.html>

<sup>xiv</sup> Al Jazeera, “Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal,” *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2015, accessed on January 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/saudi-arabia-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal-150401061906177.html>

*Iran that is dominant in Iraq and Lebanon, holding onto its ally in Syria, and now forging a new relationship with Washington—a rival, in short, without any obstacles to regional dominance, and one further emboldened to encourage Shiite populations in the Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, to oppose their Sunni rulers”.*<sup>xv</sup>

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia’s position started to weaken. The war in Yemen waged by the Saudi’s against Houthis [Zaidi Shias] was seen nothing more than their frustration and failure in the Middle East against Iran. Saudi was losing influence in the Fertile Crescent that began tell-upon their position internationally. *“Saudi Arabia is losing influence throughout the Fertile Crescent to its rival Iran. While Riyadh’s position versus Tehran has been in decline for some time, the trend is accelerating. Saudi setbacks are partly due to factors outside its control, but also due to inherent weaknesses in Saudi capacities.”*<sup>xvi</sup>

#### **4. Impact on Regional Politics**

*“The escalating rift between predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia and mostly Shiite Iran now threatens to increase sectarian tensions, as well as make conflicts in the region even more convoluted and intractable.”*<sup>xvii</sup> Saudi and Iranian rivalry had impacted the Middle Eastern politics in every way. The most disastrous impact of the rivalry was the way the region was divided into factions. Although, factions in the Middle East had existed in the past as well, for instance the communist bloc, liberal bloc, Islamist bloc etc. however, after the rivalry reached to new heights, sectarianism began to rear its ugly head in the region. The impact was felt all around Asia and in one of the incidents:

*“The arrest of an Iranian official in Afghanistan in late August for “recruiting Afghan Shiite fighters and sending them to Syria” illustrates how the Middle East’s Sunni-Shia battle for dominance has found renewed fervor in South Asia. The Iranian official, Qurban Ghalambor is a representative of Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s office. Afghan officials say Iran has created a new brigade of Afghan and Pakistani fighters led*

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<sup>xv</sup>F. Gregory Gause, “WHY THE IRAN DEAL SCARES SAUDI ARABIA,” *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2013, accessed on January 31, 2017, retrieved from

<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/why-the-iran-deal-scars-saudi-arabia>

<sup>xvi</sup> Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia losing ground to Iran,” *Al Monitor*, November 6, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, retrieved from

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/saudi-arabia-lose-ground-iran-iraq-lebanon-aoun-irgc.html>

<sup>xvii</sup> Nick Robins-Early, “How The Latest Saudi-Iran Feud Will Impact The Entire Middle East,” *The World Post*, September 1, 2016, Accessed January 15, 2017, retrieved from

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/saudi-iran-relations-feud\\_us\\_568ebf91e4b0cad15e63edb0](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/saudi-iran-relations-feud_us_568ebf91e4b0cad15e63edb0)



*by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to help efforts to prop up Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad*".<sup>xviii</sup>

On the other hand, Iran and Saudi Arabia's ongoing proxy war also "spread to northern Nigeria as evidenced by violent clashes between rival groups who follow the two main branches of Islam. Militants from the Izala Movement, who are backed by majority Sunni Saudi Arabia, attacked the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), which has ties to mainly Shia Iran."<sup>xix</sup>

Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi Arabia had been engaged in a tussle to emerge as the strongest contender in the region fighting for regional supremacy. West Asian region began to be divided into two blocs, pro-Saudi and pro-Iran. In 2015, Saudi Arabia announced to setup an Islamic Military Alliance to combat terrorism. According to many experts, the alliance was seen as a bulwark to stop the tide of Iranian influence although, "not explicitly aimed at countering Iran, the coalition includes neither Tehran nor its allied government in Iraq."<sup>xx</sup> "Saudi Arabia's main regional rivals, Iran, were not included in the list, nor was the Shia-dominated government of Iraq or the embattled regime of Syria's Bashar al-Assad."<sup>xxi</sup> Furthermore, Saudi began to lose ground to Iran in Syria and Yemen. As for Iraq, Saudi had already lost its influence among both social and political circles.

An indirect confrontation took place between Iran and Saudi Arabia when the latter executed a Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on charges of creating disturbance and terrorism in the country. Iranian "protesters in Tehran attacked the Saudi embassy [and] ransacked and burn[t] it as Iran ignored or refused Saudi requests to protect the building. Saudi Arabia formally broke off diplomatic relations with Iran...saying it would cut commercial ties

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<sup>xviii</sup> Abha Shankar, "The Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Sectarian Strife in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, October 6, 2016, accessed on January 25, 2017, retrieved from <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/the-saudi-iran-rivalry-and-sectarian-strife-in-south-asia/>

<sup>xix</sup> The New Arab and Agencies, "Saudi-Iranian rivalry stokes sectarian tensions in Nigeria," *The New Arab*, November 6, 2016, accessed on February 28, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/11/6/saudi-iranian-rivalry-stokes-sectarian-tensions-in-nigeria>

<sup>xx</sup> Samia Nakhoul, William Maclean, "Oman joins Saudi-led Islamic alliance: Gulf sources," *Reuters*, December 28, 2016, accessed on January 26, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oman-coalition-idUSKBN14H1L4>

<sup>xxi</sup> Adam Withnall, "Saudi Arabia assembles 34 Muslim country coalition to fight 'terrorism' – but there's no mention of Isis," *The Independent*, About a Year Go, accessed on January 15, 2017, accessed on <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-assembles-coalition-of-34-muslim-countries-to-fight-terrorism-but-there-s-no-mention-of-a6773546.html>

and ban Saudi travel to Iran as well.”<sup>xxii</sup> On the other hand, “...the wars in Syria and Yemen can’t be stopped without an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. And now with those two powers refusing to speak to each other, the violence is likely to get worse.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

Nevertheless, “Saudi Arabia and Iran see one another as enemies, and are locked in an escalating competition for influence and dominance of the Middle East. That rivalry goes far beyond just words, with both countries backing militant groups and proxy forces throughout the region, particularly in Syria. Their competition is a major driver of conflict in the Middle East, including the growing violence along Sunni-Shia lines.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Additionally, the rift between Saudi and Iran for influence ripped the Middle Eastern region apart since;

*“Saudi Arabia and Iran are waging a struggle for dominance that has turned much of the Middle East into their battlefield. Rather than fighting directly, they wield and in that way worsen the region’s direst problems: dictatorship, militia violence and religious extremism. The history of their rivalry tracks — and helps to explain — the Middle East’s disintegration, particularly the Sunni-Shiite sectarianism both powers have found useful to cultivate. It is a story in which the United States has been a supporting but constant player, most recently by backing the Saudi war in Yemen, which kills hundreds of civilians. These dynamics, scholars warn, point toward a future of civil wars, divided societies and unstable governments”.*<sup>xxv</sup>

Nevertheless, according to one Middle Eastern expert, who doubted “that any administration could reset the Middle East’s power struggles” said; “I do not think that the fundamental problem of the region...is something that either Mr. Trump [President Elect] or Mrs. Clinton could do that much about.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been two dominant regional powers in the Middle Eastern region. Both enjoyed cordial relationship prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution. Rift between the two began when Iran started to extend its influence in the region after its

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<sup>xxii</sup> Max Fisher, “The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that’s tearing apart the Middle East, explained,” Vox News, January 4, 2016, accessed on January 15, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.vox.com/2016/1/4/10708682/sunni-shia-iran-saudi-arabia-war>

<sup>xxiii</sup> Op. cit. 17.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxv</sup> MAX FISHER, “How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2016, accessed on 25 January, 2017, retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html?_r=0)

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.



rebirth as Islamic republic. The rift took a toll on the region as it got plunged in to conflicts. First was the Iran-Iraq war in which Saudi opposed Iran and supported Iraq. However, after the war with Iraq ended, and Iraq trying to occupy Kuwait two years later, Iran and Saudi tried to mend fences with each other. Relationship began to improve, however, after the US led coalition's invasion of Iraq, the equations were disturbed again as the new Iraq emerged as a new Middle Eastern ally of Iran. Nevertheless, Iran and Saudi again found themselves head to head with each other as the civilian uprising in Syria began and both found themselves supporting the opposites. Iran emerged as an important player in the regional politics since with its help Bashar al-Assad has managed to cling to power in Syria. However, the biggest jolt to Saudi Arabia came when its long standing ally, the US, sidelined Saudi and signed a nuclear deal with Iran which eventually led to Saudi Arabia's weakening of position in the region and internationally.

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