



RESEARCH PAPER

Security Dynamics in Saudi-Iran Relations: An Analysis (1997-2013)

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: November 19, 2019	This qualitative study aimed to discuss and analyze the complex regional security dynamics that have influenced and shaped the foreign policy of two Iranian presidents, President Muhammad Khatami (1997- 2005) and President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) towards Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Iran are gripped in a zero-sum game, contesting for land, economic resources, weapons and most specifically regional hegemony. An ancient historical and territorial dispute, age-old cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences have brought the two powers in deep-seated mistrust and acrimony. All these factors further encouraged the two nations to support their proxies through funding, military arms, soldiers, and by promoting sectarianism. In 2011, the Arab Spring escalated the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and further derailed the fragile stability and security conditions of the region. The nature and pattern of relations between the two regional rivals is highly significant as their mutual relations not only affect their domestic politics but also the strategic and political landscape of the entire middle eastern region
Accepted: December 30, 2019	
Online: December 31, 2019	
Keywords: Zero-Sum Game, Territorial Disputes, Sectarianism, Regional Security Dynamics, Hegemony	
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Introduction

Since the end of the World War II, no other bilateral relationship proved more momentous and confrontational for the region than that between the Saudi Arabia and the Iran (Wehray, 2007). Almost on every single important issue in the region, both these Muslim majority nations remained on the opposing sides, pitted against each other due to sectarian conflicts (Sunni vs Shia), ethnic diversity (Arab vs. Persian), involved in geopolitical rivalry, envious for hegemony in the Persian Gulf, the Levant, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, as well as Afghanistan. Both have

radically different forms of government and more divergent visions for regional order. In the presence of all these differences, both the nations are most probable to remain perpetual competitors (Shuster, 2007). The oil politics and religious confrontations have made the entire Middle East, the highly violent and the most tumultuous region around the globe.

Strategic Advantages for Iran and Saudi Arabia

Tehran and Riyadh both are bestowed with extraordinary assets. Iran's long proud history as a nation-state, ability to project power abroad and unique demographic superiority, offer rare competing advantages. Its distinctive strategic location in the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf provides it with a unique capability to oversee the world's busiest oil shipping route (Okruhlik, 2003). However, Iranian capability to block the Strait of Hormuz remains susceptible due to the U.S. presence in the region. Moreover, Iranian capability to disrupt the oil supply from the Gulf even for limited period of time is acknowledged and its devastating impact for the global economy also remains beyond any question (Sadjadpur, 2014).

In the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab region of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's custodianship of Islam's holiest sites, coupled with its vast energy reserves, offer clear advantages. Both the countries consider themselves the leader of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia (for its religious credentials) and Iran (its ideological bonafides as a bulwark against Israel and America). These over-ambitious designs have driven hostility over the decades (Al-Mani, 1996).

The chaotic postwar order and Cold War structures in the Middle East, which has created vast, unruled swathes of territory into which various powers and groups are moving and which has allowed the increasingly post-client states of Saudi Arabia and Iran to vie for greater power. To challenge one another's political hold, and to fight it out, via proxies and denunciations for now, for primacy in the Middle East. This battle also reveals the waning influence of the West, especially the US, in a Middle East they made but can no longer meaningfully influence, far less control. Absent the old Western oversight or realpolitik, the space is open for a more upfront if mystified fight for influence between the Saudis and Iranians.

End of the Nineties Détente

During the regimes of pragmatic Akbar Hashmi Rafsanjani and reformist Muhammad Khatami, relations between the two states improved to such an extent that leaders of both the nations realized the need to establish a strong foundation of diplomatic and social relationship.

President Khatami during his first regime once stated, "Making enemies is not a skill; real skill lies in the ability to neutralize enemies, convert animosities to human interaction and scale down hostilities." He further added, "Being mighty does not mean fighting the world at any cost, and debate does not mean abandoning the

principles and values of society” (Chubin, 2003). Khatami tried to portrait Iran’s image as a moderate and enlightened Islamic state which has tendency and capability to deal with issues diplomatically through dialogues and negotiations. Though he had to face criticism on domestic fronts but succeeded in maintaining good relations with all Gulf States. It was evident from Eight OIC summit 1997, in which massive turnout of Arab and non-Arab leaders (especially presence of Saudi king Abdullah) was an indication of the trust by Islamic world on Iran and its leadership. The supreme leader of Iran proclaimed in his address to OIC summit that "Iran poses no threat to any Islamic country" (Kamali, 2014). Finally, both the countries signed a security pact on terrorism and drug trafficking in 2001 that provided a solid stage not only to Iran and Saudi Arabia but to the entire region. Khatami expressed his desire to form collective regional security with Gulf States to shove the U.S out of the Middle Eastern region, but his second term as president proved rather more challenging on domestic as well as on international fronts. Consonant, peaceful relations couldn’t last for long as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on U.S changed the whole landscape of international politics, especially Middle East and South East Asia (Ehteshami, Zweiri, 2012).

U.S-Afghan War: Impact on Iran and Saudi Arabia Relations

Iran has unique tendency of maintaining diverse relationship with its neighbors with a mixed approach of ideological aspirations and pragmatism. After the year’s long civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban took control of most of the country, maintained peace and enforced law. Saudi Arabia was one among the only three countries of the world who recognized Taliban’s government as legitimate and legal representative of the war-trodden nation. It was mainly due to the fact that Riyadh was satisfied over the Sunni - dominated (Taliban) regime in Afghanistan lies on the Eastern border of Iran, it created an uneasy and insecure condition for Tehran in the presence of Saudi - backed Taliban regime in Kabul due to the perpetual sense of competition between the conventional rivals.

The sense of insecurity further turned into intensified crisis on foreign policy front when in 1997, Taliban government killed seven diplomats and a journalist from Iran and showed egregious attitude towards minority Shi’ite community in Afghanistan. Though Khatami handle the crisis diplomatically and enhanced Tehran’s image as a moderate and politically mature state yet faced serious criticism on domestic front from conservative hardliners (Chubin, Litwak, 2003).

End of Taliban Regime

Saudi-Taliban relationship deteriorated swiftly after 9/11 terrorist attacks and due to close involvement of Usama Bin Laden with Taliban. Elimination of Taliban regime by U.S led coalition forces in 2001 was a matter of great relief for Iran as it paid the Iranian interests but Bush harsh rhetoric created an anxiety in Tehran as he called Iran as “axis of evil”. On the other hand, news regarding Iran’s secret nuclear program in Aug, 2002 further complicated the regional security concerns. Later conservative hardliner’s victory in 2004 parliamentary elections and Ahmadinejad in

office as a result of 2005 presidential elections further deepened and strengthened Saudi Arabia's suspicions about Iran's hegemonic designs for the influence in the Middle Eastern region and beyond. Riyadh stopped Taliban support, kept chasing low profile approach by silently backing Hamid Karzai's new interim government in Afghanistan and gave direct foreign aid for the reconstruction process of the country. The increased activity in Riyadh's foreign policy towards Afghanistan resumed when kingdom mediated secret talks in 2008-09 on the direct request of Afghan government (due to its legacy in Afghan Jihad in 1980s). But it further led to escalation of competition between Tehran and Riyadh as non-Pashtun, Shia groups (Northern alliance) along with many Taliban groups, (who turned against Saudi Arabia due to Saudi betrayal in 2001 invasion of Afghanistan) ruled out any chance of Saudi contribution in any possible political solution of Afghan crisis. This development made the conditions more favorable for both Tehran and Riyadh has adopted persistent policy not to surrender the competition in the region, and kept on pursuing this zero-sum battle against each other on the soil of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia in 2012 built gigantic mosque and Islamic center in Kabul as an ideological counter - initiative to Islamic university and "Khatm-an-Nabiyin" mosque built by Iranian government of Ahmadinejad in 2006 (Warnaar, 2013).

Iran and Afghanistan not only share ethnic - linguistic bond but is also hosting around 2 million refugees from Afghanistan. According to Al-Jazeera, Kabul looks towards Iran for its economic development to minimize its dependence on Pakistan for trade and transit routes at the same time president Ashraf Ghani knew that Saudi Arabia can play a vital role in peace process. These prevailing conditions give clear indication that both Tehran and Riyadh still have much to contest in coming times on the turf of Afghanistan (Marashi, 2015).

Saudi - Iranian Clash of Interest in Iraq

History indicates that the Middle East remained a hotbed of disputes and Iraq become one of the most important factor in the region which adversely effected the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after Iranian revolution (especially eight years long Iran-Iraq war) in one way or another. Iraq is the only state which shares its borders with both the regional powers.

Khatami tried to adopt careful attitude towards the U.S policies especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 but tension heightened when President Bush in 2002 alleged Iran as "Axis of Evil". Iraq and Iran had a long aggressive and antagonistic history especially during Saddam Hussein regime and at the same time all the three main Gulf powers Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were maintaining a triangular power structure and balancing one another.

Clash of Interest in the Post - Saddam Iraq

After toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by the U.S led coalition forces, this triangular balance of power substituted by bipolar structure and situation of Iraq

became a zero-sum-game for both competitors due to the clash of interests. The removal of Iraqi former president Saddam was a massive gift for Islamic Republic, as Shiite friendly new Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nouri- al-Maliki was a matter of great relief for Iran.

On the other hand, Riyadh has serious reservations regarding Maliki government, mainly due to three reasons.

a) Riyadh had objections over the Shiite domination in the new Iraqi government as it inevitably curtails Riyadh's influence and ultimately be detrimental to Saudi interests in the region.

b) Repression of Sunni Muslims in Iraq became a matter of great concern for Riyadh due to legitimacy of Sunni ideology.

c) The most deleterious reservation was Iran's yearning for predominance in post- Saddam Iraq as well as in region (Wehrey, Karasik, Nader, et.al, 2009).

Security condition in the region immensely influenced Iranian domestic political behavior as the instability in Iraq and Afghanistan added to further sense of insecurity in Iranian masses. Hardliner conservatives got majority in 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections and sought to intensify the crisis. Hostile and antagonistic attitude of Ahmadinejad added worries in Saudi camp, although Riyadh had least problem over increasing influence of the U.S in the region, took very balance department, showed restrained attitude during U.S led coalition invasion of Iraq 2003. According to political analysts, kingdom pursued a damage control policy in Iraq. One of the Saudi officials admitted that Tehran have tremendous advantages over Riyadh in Iraq, "You have to hand it (Iraq) to them,(Iran)" a Saudi official told one of the authors in 2007 (Henner, 2007).

Saudi Contempt for Nouri-al-Maliki

Later, Saudi Arabia became extremely critical and vocal towards U.S backed Maliki government in Iraq, when Ahmadinejad used Baghdad government as a thoroughfare to illegally smuggle its oil, in order to sabotage the International sanctions, and to support the most reliable ally Bashar-ul-Assad financially and militarily in Syria. This Ahmadinejad - Maliki - Assad nexus was absolutely unbearable for Riyadh interests in the region. It aroused contempt for the Maliki government in Saudi camp, which Saudi Arabia considered complicit in Assad's large-scale massacres and, increasingly the dilemma of Iraq's Sunnis in the troubled Anbar Province, who entangled in violent actions with the Iraqi Army (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia refused to meet Iraqi P.M, Nouri-al-Maliki in a conference in Egypt and called him a person "embodying sectarian divisions". Saudi King reportedly considered him an Iranian agent as he failed to reach out Sunni minority. Saudi foreign minister Saud Al Faisal, in an interview with Council of

Foreign Relations indicted U.S for handing over Iraq to Iran and rendered U.S policies as Iranian manipulation (The Guardian, 2012, July 12).

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia had also been accused for not closing its borders with Iraq and allowed Saudi Sunni insurgents to join anti-Maliki group to destabilized Shi'ite government in Baghdad. During the Ahmadinejad era Iranian tended to see the U.S and Riyadh as a unitary evil. Political analysts think that if the presence of U.S withers in Iraq, Tehran will have more advantages over Riyadh, but it will also face mighty obstacles. As the interfering external power partly responsible for regime domination, along with the deteriorating security conditions within Iraq and economic corruption will be a great challenge for the regional powers. Iraq is likely to remain a challenging frontier for both Tehran and Riyadh and will not be helpful for a broader détente.

Arab- Israel Conflict and Impacts on Saudi-Iranian Relations

Riyadh – Tehran relationship remained more confrontational in Levant when compared with Gulf region. This is mainly due to the fact that Iran's attitude is more assertive or belligerent in Arab –Israel conflict. As both consider themselves patrons and defenders of "Palestinian nationhood" and attach massive legacy and legitimacy to their claim to prove themselves as the true leader of Muslims around the globe. Saudi – Iranian clashes on this particular issue are not merely due to growing Iranian military influence in the region but also due the fact that Tehran had symbolically challenged the Saudi claim as a leader of Islamic world, especially on Arab-Israel conflict of Palestine along with Lebanon, Syria and non-state actor Hezbollah. There is rather more interesting analyses given by JoostHiltermann, according to which "Iran's hyper activism on pan-Arab issues is not necessarily proof of its influence, but rather just the opposite an effort to overcompensate for its fundamental isolation from the rest of region. Despite its claims to universalism, it remains the odd man out" (Hiltermann, 2007).

The long unresolved Israel-Palestine dispute becomes one of the most dominant causes of Muslim rage across the world, which persistently inflamed anti-U.S, anti-Israel and anti-West sentiment in Muslim across the world due to the unjust support given to the Israel. The overwhelming anger and anguish in Muslim community everywhere in the world is a great threat for Western and U.S economic as well as strategic interests. Though cordial relations had been enjoyed by Israel and Iran in the past, but the nature of relationships changed diametrically since 1979 Iranian revolution. Iranian government after 1979 Iranian revolution consider themselves the representative and custodians of Shiite religious philosophy, professed by Ayatullah Khomeini that Western inspired modernity is the root cause of every evil and its origin traced in Zionism. Iran's ruling theocracy believes that Israel has no right to exist and it would be wiped out after the return of the Imam Mehdi. So the Iran's conflict with Israel have religious bases rather than political as the categorical rejection of Israel's right of existence is not only a mean to bridge the

Persian – Arab divide but is also helpful in its quest for leading Muslim world and regional hegemony (Sadjadpur, 2014).

The clash of arguments between Saudi Arabia and Iran on Palestinian – Israel dispute solution became vivid as the former support a “two state solution” proposed by King Abdullah in 2002, which offered Israel withdrawal to pre-1967 Arab-Israel war positions and Palestinian refugees return, exchanged with the complete recognition of Israel. On the other hand, Iran pushed for “one state solution” and still backing Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad which is the rejectionist militant groups more interestingly Sunni in ideology (Wehrey, 2014, May 22).

Regardless of strain, relations both Iran and Israel never posed any threat to each other existence, but Ahmadinejad’s over-ambitious rhetoric related to holocaust and demolishing Israel was perceived as serious existential threat as Israel is considered as “one bomb state” due to lack of strategic depth.

In Palestinian-Israel dispute, Tehran and Riyadh are once again looking for promoting competing solutions and financing the opposite local factions. According to media, Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Mottaki was told by King Abdullah in 2010 that “you as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters” after the Iranian diplomat had tried to justify Iran’s support to Hamas on the basis of Islamic solidarity (Sadjadpur, 2014).

Riyadh has fervently opposed the Tehran’s support to militant factions for Palestine cause. In 2010, Saudi Arabia attempted to keep Hamas away from Iranian influence by brokering an agreement in 2007 between Hamas and rival militant faction “Al-Fatah” but the accord couldn’t last for a long. And despite its differences over Syrian issue with Hamas, 2011 Tehran kept on struggling to restore its relations with the militant party and further struck the Riyadh’s influence in the Palestinian arena (Wehrey, 2014).

Hezbollah

Iran’s principal proxy and non-state actor, Hezbollah in the Levant, cites confrontation with Israel as its *raison d’être* for bearing arms. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement would seriously undermine this rationale. In 2000 Israel withdrawal from Southern Lebanon was considered as a significant victory for Hezbollah who announced it as a victory for Iran and Syria and this victory added in the popularity and support of Hezbollah in throughout Arab world and this immense public pressure restricted Saudi government to support Hezbollah. July 2006 Hezbollah – Israel war proved a significant turning point for the whole Middle Eastern region. It redefined the interests and issues across the region (Wright, 2010). As Hezbollah and Israel were not the only groups involved in 2006 war, other regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon were active participants as well. US military expert commented on the conflict that, “Israel lost the war in the first three days” (Quince, 2016).

Results of war were comparatively different from previous Arab - Israel wars and Hezbollah had efficiently bested the vaunted the Defense Forces of Israel. The perception of mightiness and success in 2006 war bestowed Hezbollah and Iran with much broader achievement and regional authority. The most important among those is that Israel can be defeated on the battlefield and forced to make political and territorial concessions. Iran's seizure of Pan-Arab issues stirred alarm aroused jealousy and put Riyadh on an awkward position. As Riyadh had great pride of Arab leadership capacity particularly on Palestinian-Israel conflict, especially after Egypt's withdrawal from regional chessboard since Camp David Accord (Quince, 2016).

Israeli-Palestinian conflict may not be a source of enduring, unsolvable enmity between Riyadh and Tehran. The Palestine issue is less of a zero-sum game in which the two sides are backing armed combatants on opposing sides of the sectarian spectrum than the conflict in Syria. Iran's driving force behind its foreign policy has been pragmatism and not only the religious ideology. A display of this pragmatic spirit can be seen in Palestine where hardliner Sunni militant organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are politically and financially supported by Iran against a common enemy. The increasing convergence of Tel Aviv and Riyadh policy toward Iranian nuclear program, fueled by a mutual perception in Saudi Arabia and Israel of a U.S. retreat from the region, has further injured Saudi Arabia's standing among Palestinians as well as fueled anguish in Iranian camp against Saudi Arabia.

Arab Spring and Impact on Saudi - Iran Relations

Another major event which adversely influenced not only the Saudi-Iranian relations but also the geopolitics and security of entire Middle Eastern region, were Arab awakening movements which swept many Arab states in 2011. Movement started from Tunisia then Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and reached Yemen. Riyadh and Tehran knew the fact that they are bound to be effected by the regional developments, as both occupied vital disposition in the regional arrangement. Iran welcomed the initial wave of uprisings against the monarchs and status quo. Tehran relate them with the Iranian revolution ideology (back to 1979) until it reached to Syrian borders, a close ally and most important strategic regional partner and this made Tehran's stance contradictory on Arab spring. It was rather more interesting that the revolutionary movement were not having any religious or Islamic ideological slogans. It was against corruption, unemployment, political repression, for the preservation of civil rights, liberty and dignity of individuals along with the establishment of accountable governments. Conversely Riyadh's response towards Arab uprising was more assertive, radical and combative in nature. It was mainly due to the fact that the slogans of this revolutionary movement had potential to fascinate and arouse the population in Saudi Arabia as they were also depriving of individual civil rights and basic liberties. Iranian supreme leader Khomeini provoked the masses of Arab states to over throw their illegitimate monarchs and this harsh rhetoric further widened the breach between Iran and GCC states especially Saudi Arabia and it became a zero sum game for both the competitors.

Syria

2011 popular upheaval in Syria was considerably alarming for Tehran, as Assad regime maintained almost three decades long historical relations and remained a closest ally of Iran in the region whereas case was exactly opposite in Syrian relationship with Riyadh, as both lacks trust and have nothing in common beyond Arabism. So Damascus became another battlefield of conflicting interests between Saudi Arabia and its Persian competitor (The Guardian, 2012).

Syria remained the only consistent supporter when Iran left strategically isolated after the 1979 revolution. A mutual antagonism toward Iraqi president Saddam Hussein flourished and strengthened the partnership between Iran and Syria, whereas the partnership has sustained by the shared apprehension and loathing against U.S and Israel (a common enemy). Damascus also offered Tehran a vital geographic thoroughfare to finance and arm Hezbollah (non-state actor), a Lebanese Shia militant group which is considered as one of the crown jewels of Iranian revolution. Syria became the epicenter of a geopolitical-cum-sectarian bloodbath, as the political crisis in Syria deteriorated into a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. Which have resulted in thousands of casualties and millions of people displaced either internally or externally (Sajadpour, 2014). Most of the bloodshed in Syria was an expression of the Saudi-Iranian battle for the vacuum created by the post-Cold War, and especially post-Iraq War, as Riyadh became one of the largest arms and funds provider to anti-Assad rebels, when West declared that Bashar-al-Assad is no more a legitimate ruler of Syrian nation and announced their support for anti-Assad forces (Javad, 2012). Iran strongly backed Assad regime when international and regional powers insisted for Bashar-al-Assad's resignation from office after the start of Syrian civil war.

A group of political analysts believe that Tehran's support was actually driven by its concerns regarding "what might come after Assad Alawites regime" (Alawites, a Shia sect) Syria has a dominant Sunni population. It was assumed that any Sunni regime in power aligned with Riyadh can alter the balance of power against "Shia state Iran" and can pose unprecedented level of threat to Iranian interests in the region (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Another group argued that rather than mere sectarian solidarity, Iran's primary concern was that the new composition of Syrian government may not share its ideological worldview and its assertion against Israel and U.S. Following the legacy of Khomeini, who once said, "We will support and help any nations, any groups fighting against the Zionist regime across the world." Therefore high level intelligence training and cooperation, was provided by Tehran to Damascus along with the loans and credits of billions of dollars, and subsidized oil (to make the Assad regime solvent). Massive conventional and unconventional military aid by Iran also helped in compressing and defeating popular unrest. According to the reports of U.S government and Iranian official statements, Tehran helped Damascus to create and provided training to almost fifty thousand powerful paramilitary force named as

Jaysh al-Shabi to help the Assad government forces. In short Iran stood shoulder to shoulder with Assad regime and supported reforms by regime instead of change in regime (Ehteshami, Zweiri: 2012).

On the other hand, the large-scale and brutal carnage of Sunni Arab community by Shia-Alawite dictatorship infuriated Riyadh and the Levant became a ground zero in its geostrategic resistance against Iran. It was perceived as make-or-break opportunity by Riyadh to clip Tehran's wings once and forever to change the balance of regional power back into the favor of Riyadh. The anti-Assad rebellion provided a new chance to weaken Iran, to the anti-Iran Gulf States. especially Saudi Arabia and their support to the Syrian opposition escalated in early 2012 with the intervention of Hezbollah and Revolutionary Guards forces (Sadjadpur, 2014).

According to political analysts, if the massacre in Syria continued, it will become a graveyard for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. As support for Assad regime has not only a massive financial expenditure but also has irremediable reputational cost in the predominant Sunni world whereas backing of anti-Assad groups could boomerang against the kingdom when and if these jihadis factions triumph or crushed in Syria.

However, Saudi Arabia and Iran both persisted their positions equitable and has shown no indication of recalibrating. U.S might look for its interests in both the scenarios (an end to the Assad regime or the weakening of radical Sunni Islamists) as deliberate convergence and strategic clashes with Tehran or tactical clashes and strategic convergence with Riyadh. According to the analysts' consequential regional disequilibrium will likely to continue until Syria remains a zero-sum-battle for both the regional competitors.

Bahrain

In Bahrain just like Syria, a majority was ruled by a demographic minority, though with less brutality. Tehran attempted to help disenfranchised Shiite majority (comprise 70% Shia population) in Bahrain ruled by Sunni Al-Khalifa family and a close Saudi ally.

During Arab awakening, in the case of Bahrain, Riyadh felt that potential overthrow of Al-Khalifa Sunni regime at the hand of Shia majority will multiply the risk of upheaval in its restive Shia majority, resides in the Eastern province of Saudi kingdom, located with Bahraini border. Saudi Arabia initiated deployment of Gulf Cooperation Council Peninsula Shield Force, to protect the Al-Khalifa's forceful crush of the upheaval, when the danger became too elevated to ignore. Riyadh accused that Tehran is trying to foment another Khomeinist revolution. However, this action of Riyadh provided sufficient material to Iran's propaganda campaign and most of the Shiite Muslims considered intrusion in Bahrain as attack on Shiite Muslims which further amplified the sectarian divide (Grumet, 2015).

Bahrain has also been viewed as an outpost of U.S. imperialism by Tehran, in the region, as the U.S. Navy's headquarters has been hosted by the island nation Bahrain, which is a center of logistics capabilities and maritime command-and-control system. Whereas Tehran perceives it as a means to contain its influence in the Gulf by U.S. and expects that Shia dominant government in Bahrain, would facilitate Iran to shut down a garrison of a lethal enemy in its neighborhood. Though, so far most of Bahrainian opposition has supported U.S presence in Bahrain to establish equilibrium between Riyadh and Tehran's influence.

Iran had provided strong moral yet limited material support to Bahrain's Shia, when compared with the material, massive lethal and financial support that Quds force of Iran (Revolutionary Guards a special operation unit) provided to Iraqi Shias and Alawite and to Syrian government forces. Yet according to many political analysts it was a denial of Iranian foreign policy as well (after revolution 1979) which always presented Iran as transcendent to sectarian and ethnic bases.

Yemen

Yemen became a naked struggle for hegemony and supremacy, for both Iran and Saudi Arabia especially during and after Arab Spring (Grumet, 2015). Saudi Arabia shares 700 miles' border and very protective of Yemen due the Iranian designs and motives in the region and for the sake of domination over the Shiite crescent. Located in the backyard of the kingdom, Yemen has a great importance for Riyadh and maintained close relations with Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh (for last almost two decades) which remained under its influence, politically as well as financially Whereas Iran seeks to counter Saudi influence by providing money, military assistance, training and weapons to Houthi rebels (Houthis belong to "Zaidi", sect of Shiite ideology) when Riyadh led an Arab-coalition bloody intrusion with U.S backing, to provide assistance and defense to the government of President Mansur Hadi (who was vice president during Abdullah Saleh regime and became president when Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in 2012 as a result of popular upheaval). Houthis were struggling peacefully for their civil rights against Ali Abdullah Saleh's government during 1990s but later the struggle turned into violent resistance especially after 2007 (Ehteshami, Zweiri: 2012).

Popular Arab upheaval provided opportunity to both Saudi Arabia and Iran to flex their muscles on the turf of Yemen in a most dreadful way. Yemen crisis didn't end yet and resulted in death and destruction of Muslims and made the situation even more complicated. Analysts think that the only certain thing about this crisis is that Riyadh - Tehran enmity will extend the misery of Yemen as both are keen to gain leverage. Simon analyzed that "the importance of Islam, particularly used as a legitimizing tool by both the regimes to resolve internal security dilemmas and to demonstrate external legitimacy and vitality" that leads "a soft power security dilemma guiding the rivalry" between Riyadh and Tehran (Mebon, Sinkaya, 2015)

Conclusion

Riyadh not only fear that Iran look for prominent role in the region but also feel alarms that Tehran desire to attain complete control of a region in its hands. So Riyadh often seems to unite Muslim world under the "Sunni umbrella" on sectarian basis knowing the fact that Sunnis constitute around 80-85% of the total Muslim population. The ascendancy of Shiaism as well as the increasing Iranian influence in the region has been perceived by Saudi Arabia in zero-sum terms. Whereas, Iran want to hold "Pan - Islamic banner" rather than "Shia - banner" and looking forward to unite Muslims with the antipathy slogans against U.S & Israel.

Riyadh does not seem to be on top despite of its strengths at home, as the governments of its allies are facing instabilities. Though Saudi camp is under threat due to growing Iranian influence yet this does not necessarily mean that Tehran is going to be the "ultimate victor" as both regional powers have to dare massive obstacles in the future. In the changing trends of international politics, states are showing more tolerance and openness towards each other while Riyadh - Tehran are among those few who are still resisting the new trend.

The domestic political conditions in both the regional powers have been viewed by U.S in an entirely different way. U.S wants to see more public representative government in Iran that would eventually lead to better U.S - Iran relations and unrest among Iranian masses has been seen with the constructive and optimistic lens. Whereas conversely in Riyadh case agitation among Saudi masses is likely to bring those forces in power that might not be that much in favor of U.S interests in the region so political upheaval in Saudi Arabia is not at all a news in favor of America.

Many analysts are of the view that the U.S has primarily looked for a military solution of political issues in the region and focused more on arming Iranian neighbors as the military budget of Saudi Arabia has been increased many times from 2008 to 2013 and onwards as Saudi Arabia is afraid that if the U.S would decide to leave the region, the task of containing and restricting Iran will solely fall on Riyadh's shoulders. Therefore, even the U.S presence or departure is a zero sum game for Riyadh and Tehran.

Iran seeks a regional order in which outside powers are excluded and in which it plays a leading role in the Caucasus, Persian Gulf and broader Middle East, and parts of South Asia. As a starting point, this strategy entails a reduction of the U.S. presence and influence in the region. Iranian leaders seem very clear in the zero sum competition with Saudi Arabia for regional influence under way and it seems that Iranian- Saudi relations will continue to be turbulent.

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